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*My War Experiences*





GENERAL MAP OF THE WESTERN THEATRE.



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# MY WAR EXPERIENCES

By Crown Prince William of Germany

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: : With Four Folding Maps : :  
and Thirteen other Sketches in the Text

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## INTRODUCTION

IN the peace of my seclusion on the little island of Wieringen in the Zuider Zee this book has come into existence as a material part of my "Memories." Its purpose is to raise a pious monument to the tried and true fighters of the 5th Army and the German Crown Prince's Army Group in the hearts of the German people and the literature of the World War, a monument raised in a spirit of true comradeship like those simple soldiers' graves, with their wooden crosses, round the frontiers of our German Fatherland, which bear witness to the loyal devotion of Germans to the last.

Human words, spoken or written, can certainly do but poor justice to the feats and achievements to the credit of our heroes on the Western front in more than four years of war. Loyalty, self-sacrifice, resignation and devotion were there displayed by German men in a measure the like of which the world had never seen. The German grew accustomed to fighting against a two-fold and three-fold superiority. Against a ten-fold superiority, supported by the technical resources of the whole world, the German Western front defended itself for years until it was ultimately reduced to a host of heroes, bleeding from a thousand wounds, left to their own resources and yet invincible in battle.

A mighty spectacle, unforgettable notwithstanding its tragic end !

Looking back, I have three visions ever before my eyes.

In August, 1914, after the Battle of Longwy : interminable columns of "field greys," crowding every road and gleefully

## INTRODUCTION

pursuing the beaten foe to the Meuse. Even the sorely wounded rise at the wayside with the cry : " Hurrah ! We're going forward ; we're winning ! "

Then in the years of trench warfare, the grave, hard, determined faces. When I talk to my soldiers I get the answer : " We shall hold out ; we *must* hold out." And so the living wall stands on the Western front and year in, year out, the brave foe breaks his head against it.

Lastly in the autumn of 1918. Decimated units. Companies of ten and twenty men with hollow cheeks and torn, muddy uniforms. No enthusiasm or belief in victory now. Their step is slow and they are bowed down. But in their eyes flame the courage of despair, unconquerable pride, contempt of death, rage and fury at the misery of the Fatherland.

So have I seen my soldiers in the years of war and so I see them now with the eyes of my mind.

May this book be consecrated to you, my incomparable comrades, the living and the dead !

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## PART I



# MY WAR EXPERIENCES

## CHAPTER I

### MY APPOINTMENT AS COMMANDER OF THE FIFTH ARMY

**I**N my latest Mobilization Orders I was selected as Commander of the 1st Guard Infantry Division, and I was very glad to think that if war came—and in view of the general development of our political situation I could not help fearing it—I should find myself at the head of such a tried body of élite troops. But I was also inspired by a very human desire to follow the example of my ancestors, and see what I could do in even higher posts. The Chief of the General Staff of the army had had this wish of mine under consideration after my experiences on the Great General Staff, and in Staff rides under the best masters in the last few years before the war gave me the theoretical grounding required for the command of large units. At the end of July, 1914, I returned to Potsdam from my summer leave in Zoppot, and there passed through those days of terrible anxiety and strain in which the question of war or peace hung in the balance.

On July 31 the whole Imperial Family went to Berlin, and I took up my residence in my palace. All the authorities were working at the highest pressure, but with unruffled calm and grave dignity. But it was in the Great General Staff itself that my impressions were the most favourable. At this tremendous moment, in which the work it had devoted for more than forty years to systematic mobilization and the training of leaders was to be put to the searching test of war,

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the General Staff was fully conscious of its responsible task, and faced coming events anxiously but also confidently.

With the proclamation of the *Drohende Kriegsgefahr*\* on July 31, 1914—the signal to all military and civil authorities that mobilization might be the very next step, the question of finding a G. O. C. for the German Fifth Army became urgent. Colonel-General von Eichhorn, the Inspector-General of the Seventh Army Inspectorate in Saarbrücken, had been earmarked for the vacancy, but he was ill. After consulting the Deputy Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, who had looked after my strategical and tactical education in the General Staff up to the outbreak of war, Colonel-General von Moltke, the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army, proposed to His Majesty that I should be appointed an Army Commander. He had taken into account the historical fact that in the wars of 1866 and 1870–71 the Crown Prince Frederick William of Prussia had led an army in the field at a comparatively early age.

When the world-historical decision as to war or peace was given on August 1, with the signature of the Mobilization Decree the whole Imperial Family was gathered together in His Majesty's ante-room. I was called in, and my father, looking very grave, said to me in the presence of the Imperial Chancellor, the Chief of the General Staff, the War Minister and the Secretary of State for the Imperial Navy: "I have appointed you Commander of the Fifth Army. You're to have Lieutenant-General Schmidt von Knobelsdorf as Chief of Staff. Whatever he advises you must do."

When I had kissed my father's hand in silence, General von Moltke affectionately laid his huge palm on my shoulder and spoke these encouraging words: "You have good military intuition and a sound knowledge of men. You'll have just the same duty as the others. Never forget that the Army Commander is and remains the responsible head. The Chief of Staff has to advise, and now—God be with you!"

With grateful hearts for the high employment provided for us by our Mobilization Orders, we sons left the Castle, proudly conscious of our youthful vigour and cheered by an enormous crowd. But deep in my heart I was wrestling with grave thoughts about the war I had seen coming so long and so

\* Imminent danger of war.



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anxiously. Our political situation could not have been more unfavourable! Germany and Austria unaided against a whole world. How was it to end? But there was no time for gloom. The force of facts, my cheerful confidence that God would never desert his Germans and my youthful pride at being Commander of the Fifth Army quickly prevailed.

Of course the Fifth Army maintained its composition—even in its Headquarters Staff—as provided by Mobilization Orders, notwithstanding the change of G.O.C.

The electric spark of the Mobilization Decree on August 1, 1914, fired a train of indescribable enthusiasm from Memel to the tiniest hamlet in the South German mountains, enthusiasm which in its volume and unity swept everything irresistibly before it. Everyone, whether soldier or civilian, man or woman, realized that right was on our side and wanted to share the duty and responsibility of the common defence of our sorely-menaced Fatherland. At that time the vast majority of the German people regarded the military solution of the ever-increasing political tension as the end of a nightmare. Our most unfortunate foreign policy had led to our complete isolation and produced recurring external crises which in recent years had ended more than once in a diplomatic retreat and loss of prestige for Germany. But now a storm for which Germany was in no way responsible was to clear the sultry atmosphere, and the oppressive ring of "encirclement" was at last to be broken. After the war Germany would once more breathe freely, we hoped; she would have settled with her enemies and envious rivals, and be able to develop to a degree quite unsuspected. Those were the thoughts of the plainest man in the street in his genuine patriotic emotion which had nothing in common with superficial enthusiasm, artificially roused and nourished. The mighty chorus of assent in the Reichstag, the embodiment of the national will, hammered the German people, on August 4, 1914, into that solid, united, national force which in victorious resistance to almost the whole world was to accomplish feats more amazing than the world had ever seen.

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### I LEAVE FOR THE FRONT AND TAKE UP MY NEW DUTIES

For myself and my personal suite no time was to be lost in taking our places in the machinery of mobilization, now in tireless motion. Instead of following the highly-detailed instructions in our orders for joining the 1st Guard Infantry Division, the transport of my headquarters, with servants, horses and baggage, duly moved to Saarbrücken.

On August 3 I followed with the officers of my personal staff, accompanied as far as Jüterborg by my wife and that dear friend of my youth, Captain von Wedel, of the 1st Regiment of Foot Guards. Our leave-taking was short and cheerful; how nice if we could be back by Christmas! But I had to relieve the pangs of parting with Wedel by a few cheering words. He, Captain Count Finckenstein and Captain von Mitzlaff had been my inseparable comrades when I first had my lieutenant's commission in the 1st Guard Regiment, and my companions on my travels and in many hunting and shooting parties at home and abroad. The cruel war soon broke up this true band of brothers. All three fell for Emperor and Empire on the Western Front.

The German railways, the most important resource of our General Staff for a speedy and complete concentration, worked solely in its service. At all vital buildings, bridges and stations guards and patrols could be seen at work. There was an amazing contrast between the peaceful fields of the German homeland, glorious with the waiting harvest, and the tremendous traffic on the railways, and as one approached the frontier the charming scenes of peace gave place to the stern countenance of a war which was even then casting its spell upon everything and everyone.

My personal staff consisted of the Aides-de-Camp, Major von Müller, formerly on the Headquarters Staff of the 21st I.D.,\* Major Edler von der Planitz, who was formerly in the 1st Guard Field Artillery Regiment and was subsequently killed, my Gentleman-in-Waiting, Captain von Behr, and General Dr. Wiedenmann, of the Medical Service.

After the Chief of Staff of the 5th Army, Lieutenant-General

\* Infantry Division.

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Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, had joined me at Frankfort a. M. early in the morning of August 4, our journey ended in Saarbrücken, where we were received by General von Below, commanding the 21st A.C.\* There was great excitement in the busy town on the Saar. The colossal enthusiasm of all ranks and classes of the nation was all that could be seen in Berlin, but here it was tempered with some slight anxiety as to what the next few days might bring. All the warmer and more boisterous was the welcome of the inhabitants to the Army Commander on his arrival so soon after the mobilization decree was issued.

Straight from the station we went to the Corps Headquarters, where the Corps Commander made his report as to the situation of the covering troops, the whole business of frontier protection now being transferred to the Army Headquarters Staff. As the covering troops, who had been ready for the field at an early stage, were a very thin and far-flung line and the French had concentrated great masses of cavalry, the situation at first was a very anxious one, faced as we were with the possibility of an early cavalry raid to throw our detrainment into confusion. A very youthful and simple *chasseur à cheval* had, in fact, just been brought in as a prisoner. The innumerable reports gave a very conflicting picture but as a matter of fact we had nothing to fear. The French cavalry, conscious of the lack of mobility it was to reveal throughout the whole war, never crossed the frontier in any considerable force. The enemy was almost nervously coy.

I and my Chief of Staff established our quarters in the fine building of the *Landratsamt*, where our host, Landrat von Miquel, soon proved himself a particularly capable, energetic and careful man.

The mobilization and internal organization of the great operations and administrative sections of the Army Headquarters was carried out further back at the headquarters of the 8th A.C. in Coblenz, and was in the hands of the careful and ever industrious Deputy Chief of Staff, General Rogalla von Bieberstein, and my splendid G.S.O.1,† Major von Heymann, who had proved his worth in every kind of post. The latter transferred the Operations Section at the earliest possible moment to the Casino of Saarbrücken—a most suitable spot—

\* Army Corps.

† First General Staff Officer.

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and little by little the whole staff was firmly under the thumb of the Army Chief of Staff.

Of the other General Staff Officers, Majors Matthias and Ehrhardt deserve special mention. Matthias, who was in charge of Section 1b, was the type of the trained staff officer, the serious-minded and reliable man who works incessantly day and night. Ehrhardt, the right-hand man of the Deputy Chief of Staff, was an all-round, trained officer, whose warm heart made him ever anxious for the welfare of the men. Through his many relations with industrial and commercial circles he was always well informed on affairs at home. In the course of the campaign this loyal, honest man and I became great friends.

The First Aide-de-Camp, Major Voigt, distinguished himself by his ability and never-failing knowledge of men. The Second Aide-de-Camp was Captain Pflugradt, a loyal, reliable character and a worthy scion of a soldier family which has spent itself in duty and devotion for generations. Subsequently he also proved his worth as a brave and ideal regimental officer in the Italian theatre of war.

### THE CONCENTRATION OF THE 5TH ARMY

The covering troops of the 13th and 16th Corps were ready to take the field at once, and had been concentrated on the first and second days of mobilization between Metz and the southern frontier of Luxemburg. Under their protection the systematic concentration of the 5th Army, with its fighting units and the great field and administrative machinery of the L. of C.\* organization, was completed in the Diedenhofen-Metz-Saarbrücken-Offweiler-Merzig area. From every quarter of the German Fatherland the trains poured into the many railheads in Lorraine. There were sons of Posen and Silesia in the 5th A.C., the 5th R.C.†, and the 6th R.C.; brave Würtembergers in the 13th A.C.; Alsatians and Lorrainers, mingled with representatives of all German districts, in the 16th A.C. Mixed landwehr brigades were also coming up, the 13th from the Province of Saxony, the 48th from Hesse, the 45th from the Kingdom of Saxony, in addition to the 53rd Würtemberg

\* Lines of Communication.

† Reserve Corps.



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and the 9th Bavarian. Then came four Mortar Battalions of the 6th and 12th Regiments and the 20th and 29th Pioneer Battalions. As Crown Prince of the German Empire I delighted in this happy mingling of men of all stocks in the force under my command and I made up my mind to foster the sense of brotherhood among them with all my might.

The daily conferences at Army Headquarters gave us a clear picture of the progress of the concentration and the removal of causes of friction in the mighty machine, every part of which had to respond to the single will of the Commander if the maximum of energy and fighting efficiency was to be attained. We were straining at the leash but it looked as if our patience was to be sorely tried while important news came in from other fronts of the first happenings of the war. The great feat of the capture of Liège by surprise was followed by the news that England had declared war upon us—an event I had long been expecting. On the other hand, Italy's persistence in her alleged neutrality angered me all the more because her King had assured me on my last visit to him that in case of war Italy would stand at Germany's side, come what might. On August 8 occurred the French entry into Mülhausen; in the next few days their 7th A.C. was compelled to evacuate it under German pressure and retire to the fortified zone of Belfort. Our imagination was not yet accustomed to the gigantic scale of modern war and these promising preludes seemed to us tremendous events, in which, by the success of our covering troops west of Metz in capturing Briey, we ourselves were worthily associated, and our left neighbour, the 6th Army, by the victory of the 42nd I.D.\* at Lagarde.

Strategic reconnaissance on the front of the 5th Army was in the hands of the Commander of the 4th Cavalry Corps, Lieutenant-General Freiherr von Hollen, who had two cavalry divisions under his orders—General von Unger's 3rd and Lieutenant-General Count von Schmettow's 6th—and at first had to operate under the immediate direction of Main Headquarters. My Headquarters Staff in Saarbrücken exchanged views with him about our prospective co-operation, and particularly about the most vital question of the hour—the movements of the enemy. Under my tunic of the Danzig

\* Infantry Division.

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Hussars beat a cavalryman's heart, enthusiastic for the dashing, far-ranging investigations of strategic reconnaissance patrols. It was with a feeling of true personal sympathy that I followed in spirit the bold feelers of the cavalry divisions sent forth after August 4 by the covering troops of General von Moser's 53rd Württemberg Infantry Brigade. They and the slowly developing aerial reconnaissance, brought in the pieces for that mosaic of the enemy's position and intentions which was the foundation for the Army's subsequent tasks. Just as we had hung a veil before our fortified Moselle line, Diedenhofen-Metz, the French must have hung theirs in front of the fortified Verdun zone. Our first business, therefore, was to clear up the situation in the triangle between the southern Luxemburg-Belgian frontier with the French (Montmédy-Longwy) barrier forts and our western frontier near Metz, *i.e.*, over the Montmédy-Longuyon-Conflans line. This region, with its vital railways, Luxemburg - Montmédy - Diedenhofen - Longuyon and Metz-Conflans-Longuyon, both extending to Montmédy-Sedan-Charleville, is traversed from south-east to north-west by three not unimportant streams, which in places flow through deep ravines. The northern stream flows from Landres, via Pierrepont-Longuyon-Montmédy and then Carignan, to its confluence with the Meuse at Sedan, in the channel of the Pierre, Crusnes and Chiers. From the north-east it receives tributaries flowing through deep valleys, which cut the district up in a very marked fashion. The central section is formed by the river Othain, which flows from Gondrecourt, through Spincourt-St. Laurent-Marville, to its junction with the Chiers at Montmédy. The southern section is the marshy course of the Loison, from the village of the same name via Mangiennes-Vitarville-Louppy to Montmédy, where it too falls into the Chiers. This physical conformation of the region was of material importance for the subsequent operations of the army.

The numerous reports we received made it certain that the two barrier forts were held, but the Longuyon sector, the most northerly of the three referred to, was free of the enemy. On the other hand our patrols had come under fire everywhere on the Othain and observed active entrenching work at Marville, St. Laurent, Spincourt and Gouraincourt. Inspired by the spirit of the offensive which is second nature to our

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cavalry, portions of the 6th Cavalry Division had broken through the enemy's river posts at Pillon in a smart raid on August 10th. But they were enticed by a portion of the French 4th Cavalry Division into a well-concealed ambushade in the woods and came under hostile artillery fire, and at the cost of heavy losses confirmed the presence of a force from Verdun holding the line of the Othain. As a southern extension of the enemy's Othain position the 16th A.C. had ascertained through its own reconnaissance work that the French had a line of outposts from Etain to Maizeray and Woël. Opposite these were our covering troops (the 144th Infantry Regiment) from Briey in the Fléville-Conflans line. Even at this stage it began to dawn upon us that after the enemy's refusal to venture on great cavalry raids into German territory the field of action between the army front and the region within effective range of the fortified zone of Verdun was too circumscribed and unpromising for a cavalry corps.

In places the *franc-tireur* warfare begun by individual French, and more particularly Belgian civilians, assumed a considerable scale and was accompanied by deplorable losses and inhuman atrocities ; it could only be checked by punishing the villages concerned. I asked the German Government to make appropriate representations to Paris but unfortunately was soon compelled to admit that among our enemies the chivalrous conduct which was the hallmark of the armies of former times had given place, the moment the war began, to a national war with all the hatred and cruelty natural to it.

The exchange of news with the neighbouring armies, Duke Albrecht of Württemberg's 4th in Treves and the Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria's 6th, soon brought a complete unity of view. We devoted ourselves particularly to the question of close co-operation with the 6th Army, as that might soon become necessary. After the successful opening actions fought by the 6th Army in Lorraine, its splendid reconnoitring work had established the concentration of very large hostile forces from the fortified Toul-Nancy camp on the Pont à Mousson-Raon l'Etape line, and this army anticipated an attempt by a superior enemy force to break through between Metz and the Vosges against the left flank of our armies. In such an attempt Main Headquarters saw no danger to its

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own offensive but rather an opportunity of inflicting an early and decisive defeat on the enemy as he was thrusting through into Lorraine.

With that end in view the 6th Army was to fall back slowly on the Saar. If the enemy followed it up a double envelopment was planned against them, to be carried out by the 7th Army from the Vosges and parts of the 5th Army from the north.

At our conferences with the Bavarian Crown Prince and his Chief of Staff in St. Avold, we reached complete agreement, particularly as the Nied line west of Bolchen which was then being fortified promised successful co-operation between the 5th and 6th Armies. This Nied line was in the zone of the Higher Landwehr Commander on Special Duty No. 2, Lieutenant-General Franke, who was carrying out the fortification works with the help of civil labour and the five mixed landwehr brigades already mentioned. He had also brought forward some of the fortress artillery from Metz.

When we inspected the position itself and examined its strength and weakness and the corresponding distribution of the artillery, the idea of bringing up two more mixed landwehr brigades from Metz was very fully discussed, because we were anxious as far as possible to avoid weakening the 5th Army for its own operations in the west by robbing it of first-line troops. It is obvious that we should not have exactly relished splitting up our main fighting units. But in any case we decided that for the time being its three active corps (the 5th, 13th and 16th) should not pass beyond the Bettemburg-Diedenhofen-Metz line and that the two Reserve Corps (the 5th R.C. and 6th R.C.) should connect up with the Nied position on the north-west.

In contrast to the grave and often gloomy faces of the people of German Lorraine a most splendid impression was made by the business-like appearance of the troop trains as they arrived with their magnificent horses and their carefully packed vehicles. We were very much struck by the perfect bearing of the regiments of the local garrisons, particularly the 70th Infantry Regiment in Saarbrücken. In my heart, too, the flaming enthusiasm of this nation in arms created a feeling of unshakable confidence and a justified conviction that in this fight for its very existence which had been forced



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on the German people its red-hot, all-conquering determination *must* lead us triumphantly to victory.

In these days, when I was beginning to accustom myself to the heavy and responsible duties of an Army Commander, my first visit to a hospital made an unforgettable impression upon me. The victims of the opening moves of the great conflict lay there uncomplaining and when they assured me with sparkling eyes that we Germans would soon settle accounts with the Frenchmen I could not keep the tears out of mine.

Personal discussion with General von Fabeck (G. O. C. 13th Corps) and General von Mudra (G. O. C. 16th Corps), an officer endowed with all the vitality of youth, showed that the army would very soon be ready for the field.

### THE PLAN OF CAMPAIGN

The German plan of campaign was based on the idea that with Germany's central position in Europe she could not allow herself to be crushed to death by a war on two fronts and that she must fight her defensive war offensively to spare German soil the terrors and sufferings of war. Lack of men made a simultaneous offensive on the Western and Eastern fronts impossible. The immense numerical superiority of our enemies was to be overcome by successive offensives based on our confidence that the Russians could not be ready for the field till a later stage. After leaving a force sufficient, and only sufficient, to protect the Eastern provinces, the concentrated mass of the German field army was to force a decision in the West so soon that our main task there was accomplished and before the Russian army of millions could take any effective part.

Would-be-wise critics have felt constrained after the tragic end of the war to condemn this strategic conception which originated in the brain of Count Schlieffen. The most varying solutions of the problem of a war on several fronts have been put forward, not in enemy but in German publications, which is significant. Some believe that true wisdom was enshrined in the recipe: a decision against Russia combined with strategic defence against France at first. Others prefer a middle course: great initial victories either in the West or the East but with no idea of exploiting them to the anni-

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hilation of the enemy; moderation in success and economy in the use of our human and other material, so that in a long war our military, national and economic resources should not be overstrained or prematurely exhausted. Others again believe firmly in the idea of a decision in itself, but would not have us resort to it on our own initiative at the outset, but rather as a reply in the natural course of events to the opening move, which is purposely conceded to the enemy.

All these and similar suggestions seem to me more or less the offspring of wisdom after the event. Presumably we should never have heard of them if our offensive in the West at the beginning of the war had been followed by the annihilating victory at which Schlieffen aimed and which his genius guaranteed. That that victory escaped us was in no way due to any fault in Schlieffen's strategy, but solely to our patent departure from his plan. The deviation seems to me not so much in the changes in the external form of the German concentration in the West, due to the accumulation of large forces in the Reichsland and the extension of the operative front into Upper Alsace, (in my view General Ludendorff has given important reasons for this) as in the conduct of the operations after concentration was complete. However sound, simple and promising a strategic conception may be, when it is watered down by those responsible for its execution, as in my opinion Schlieffen's plan was by the German leaders in 1914, it cannot possibly result in victory.

Among other assumptions our plan of campaign was founded on the supposition that the enemy in the West would accept the decision offered him. This assumption proved itself sound inasmuch as our opponent actually meant to take the offensive himself. Thus we had an almost unprecedented opportunity of obtaining a great decision at an early stage. The great French fortified line, Verdun-Belfort, was to be turned on the North by the German armies in the West by executing a mighty left wheel through Belgium and Luxemburg into the heart of France with the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Armies, starting from their concentration zone on the Crefeld-Aix-la-Chapelle-Treves-Diedenhofen-Metz line. The function of the 5th Army on the left wing was to hold the pivot of the fortified Moselle line—Diedenhofen—and in close touch with the 4th Army project its right wing from Bettem-

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burg through Mamer-Arlon on Florenville. Then, in left echelon, it was to keep in step with the whole front as it swung round and gradually turn into the general—due south—line of advance. The barrier forts Montmédy and Longwy were to be rushed in the process.

This task assigned to my army involved my Operations Section in difficult problems of march dispositions. Their object was to bring our fighting units with their innumerable ammunition and supply columns from their extensive assembly zone over the line of the Moselle east of Diedenhofen from north to west, and this though the roads were few and the army must be kept closely concentrated. What had been the covering brigades and, as the operations developed, the two divisions of the 4th R. C., served as a screen to this movement. Of these the 3rd R. D., after the action at Pillon on August 10th, had swung round Longwy on the east and put out feelers in a south-westerly direction west of the River Chiers—Longwy-Longuyon line. In deep echelon the three active corps of my army were assembled on the line of the Moselle by the evening of August 16th, the 5th A. C. at Königs-machern, the 13th A. C. in the neighbourhood of Diedenhofen and the 16th A. C. at and north of Metz. In the second echelon behind them the two reserve corps lay north-west of the Nied, the 5th R. C. on the line Niedaltorf-Busendorf and the 6th R. C. on the line Hessdorf-Bettingen.

The Army Staff advanced its headquarters from Saarbrücken to Diedenhofen while His Majesty's main headquarters moved to Coblenz, to which all reports had now to be made. Within its walls and modern works the small Moselle fortress, into which eight battalions were crammed, presented the gay picture of camp life in Wallenstein's day. Under the influence of these novel and exciting impressions the honest Landsturm and Landwehr men of the garrison began to increase their warlike ardour by an excessive resort to the bottle. A temporary but drastic prohibition of the sale of liquor and a reminder that fortress garrisons would soon have serious work, and in the field too, produced a more sober frame of mind. The governor of Metz was also instructed to have a strong reserve of all arms concentrated and ready for the field by August 20. This force subsequently did great things as the 33rd Reserve Division under General Bausch.

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My host at Diedenhofen was *Kreisdirektor* Ullersberger, a native of the Reichsland, whose lucid, well-considered views of the future of the Reichsland and the form of government it needed were in remarkable contrast to those confused opinions of other administrative officials we unfortunately so often heard. In my room hung a large portrait in oils, painted by Frau von Stötzer, widow of the former G. O. C. Metz Command, of the absent lady of the house with her child. A more perfect type of the German Madonna it is impossible to imagine.

### THE ARMY OF 1914

Never shall I forget those early days and the impression made upon me by the columns of my army as they marched past me—an interminable file—in the burning August sunshine. Their tanned faces expressed resolution and confidence in victory, and from the ranks rose the beautiful old German soldier's songs. What I was witnessing was the proud, determined and cheerful tramping of a host of heroes, a host innumerable, welded by the discipline of centuries into a solid, united whole. The German Army of 1914! Its match was not to be found.

I should like to say something about our splendid old Army. Its core was the Active\* Corps of Officers. In the course of more than forty years of peace this Corps had become of an absolutely uniform type, the basis of which had been laid by the iron sense of duty of old Prussian discipline and the training which had stood the test over and over again on the battlefields of earlier wars. Former racial distinctions between North and South had given way to genuine brotherhood. There was no hostility in the differences—if there ever were any—between the nobility and the commoners or the members of the different arms of the service. Nor as yet had the uniform character of the Corps been prejudicially affected by the systematic extension in the last few years before the war of the classes from which it was recruited. The so-called "Caste Spirit," the attitude of exclusiveness towards other classes of the educated *bourgeoisie*, existed more or less only in the imaginations of those sections of the community which

\* As opposed to Officers of the Reserve.



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were naturally hostile to the Corps of Officers. Isolated and regrettable cases of arrogance or misplaced exhibitions of class-feeling were universally condemned as wrong. The moral solidity of the German Corps of Officers rested on the firm foundations of duty and a lofty conception of honour, true comradeship and unswerving, selfless devotion to the person of the All-Highest War Lord, a conception consecrated by centuries of tradition. The Corps was an utterly non-political body, monarchist in its very bones and yet part and parcel of the nation. In spite of the great, and in many cases excessive, physical and mental strain imposed by the service in peace time, the vast majority of our officers were able to bring a healthy elasticity of mind to the cheerful performance of their duties. The majority were also able to resist the ruinous influences of pleasure-seeking and enervating luxury better than many other sections of the population. Much was done for their scientific education. Practice and theory supplemented each other in the most happy fashion.

Of course I will not deny that there were certain weaknesses and dangers. The relations between the grades, even out of service hours, were not without a certain element of constraint. The most senior officers were given powers, and very great powers, of which wise use was not always made. As in all other classes and professions, the Army too had its weaker characters and braggarts who were inclined to vaunt their own capabilities and achievements at the expense of their comrades. But I emphatically deny that our strong military-hierarchical discipline prevented the development and effectiveness of individuality and personal character. The Great War proved to demonstration what an enormous number of born leaders—independent men, who loved nothing more than responsibility—all ranks of our Corps of Officers had produced in peace time. In the case of the Officers of the Reserve we occasionally noted the weakness—perhaps their only perceptible weakness and a very natural one—of their not entirely adequate training as regimental officers. It was due solely to their periods of service, which were too short and at too great intervals. On the battlefields of the World War the majority of them blossomed out as leaders of men in a surprisingly short time and worthily took their places at the side of the Active Officers.

From a professional point of view the Corps of Non-Com-

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missioned Officers was splendidly trained and inspired by the highest devotion to its work and calling. After the experiences of the war I have not the slightest doubt that it would have been possible to make even more of this material, and to produce junior officers who were self-reliant and quite ready to assume responsibility. I regarded it as a mistake in the war that N.C.O.'s who had proved their capacity were not more frequently given commissions and outworn traditions disregarded. As a matter of fact I was equally unsuccessful when I urged that capable officers who had distinguished themselves by their characters and special feats of arms in the war should be promoted without regard to age or rank in the service.

The men themselves were inspired by a fine soldierly spirit, the expression of inherent natural military virtues. This spirit was displayed in different forms, according to race and district, sometimes in a certain reckless élan, sometimes in stubbornness, ingenuity and adaptability. The long and systematic agitation against militarism had only ever-dwindling results to show in the Army itself. It had remained sound. In spite of all social and educational distinctions, officers and men had grown up together in close association. The foundations of obedience were iron discipline, but also, and not less, the confidence and good-will of the subordinate, the sympathetic interest of the officer and true and loyal brotherhood in the hour of trial and death. What the anti-militarists were fond of belittling as "Corpse Obedience" was in reality the conscious subordination of the individual to the whole, and voluntary and cheerful devotion to the service in performance of a moral duty which was recognized to be right, proper and necessary.

Thus the Nation in Arms of 1914 was inspired by that spirit which a Hohenzollern, Prince Frederick Charles, who was unsurpassed in the training of men, once described very happily when he put the following enthusiastic question into the mouth of a soldier on the day of battle: "Where do you order us to die, sir?" For more than four years the German fighting man went to a hero's death with that dumb question in his heart and in his eyes. O spirit of the Fighting Man!

As regards the various arms of the service, I was convinced that both in training and instruction our infantry was fully equal to the demands of modern war, and that as regards equipment and organization all that was required was more machine-

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guns. Nor can there be any doubt that our cavalry was superior to the French. Its training, arms and horses were of the best. But here again I wanted more machine-guns for pack transport and had done my best in peace time to secure them, but in vain.

On the other hand, after my year's service with the Field Artillery, during which I commanded a battery and attended a large number of artillery exercises, I was not free from certain doubts about this arm of the service. In France the artillery, with its Napoleonic tradition, was the "Queen of the Service," but with us it seemed to me that the Field Artillery did not enjoy the same reputation and confident admiration as its mysteriously learned sister, the Foot Artillery. It certainly did not play the part corresponding to its vital importance. I have often strongly opposed such a mistaken view, but I was forced to recognize that the cause of it was the curious phenomenon that, in contrast to the other arms, the Field Artillery did not always regard their weapon itself as the principal thing. The gun did not everywhere play the same rôle as the infantryman's rifle or the cavalryman's horse. Instead of concentrating exclusively on the true purpose of the arm, which demanded absolute perfection in the art of shooting under the most difficult circumstances, many of the artillery troops patently took too much interest in that mere means to the end, the horse. Young officers liked to rival their cavalry comrades in horsemanship, and would rather discuss breaking-in and riding with a cavalryman than shooting with their brothers in their own arm. Before the war the C.O. of a battery once said to me, half in jest and half in earnest : "I've got a battery of first-rate bays now; they're absolutely a show team. If I could only leave the silly guns behind!"

In our artillery tactics we attached too much importance to mobility (galloping exercises) and too little to heavy teams and shooting. We needed a standard heavy team, at any rate something similar to the wheelers of our Field Artillery, and in this might have learned something from the French. In our first battles we found among their shattered batteries six small but very strong horses, unusually thick-set, with very sloping haunches, not standing high, but with small, fine heads—the ideal horse for a heavy team.

We were soon to learn all about the French field gun and

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its functions. Hitherto I had always assumed that our field gun was inferior to the French in range, but have recently been assured by experts that that was not the case. The range of the French and German shrapnel was approximately the same, *i.e.*, over 8,000 metres, and the range of the French high-explosive was not much behind ours, so I can only explain the fact that at the beginning of the war we Germans soon had a feeling that the range of the French field gun was superior to ours on the assumption that our Field Artillery was not able to make as full use of the range of their guns as the enemy did of his. This feeling may also have been fostered by the circumstance that, particularly in the early actions, the loud noise of the French high-explosive on detonation had a great moral effect on our men.

The gunnery training of the French artillery stood at a high level. On the other hand, at the beginning of the war we enjoyed undoubted superiority in our heavy artillery, which proved itself a brilliant success. Nor had the French anything to match our light field howitzers—or, at any rate, on anything like the same scale.

### THE ADVANCE BEGINS

The regular reports received from Hollen's Cavalry Corps, the covering troops and the G.O.C. Metz still gave us no clear idea what the enemy was doing on the front of my army. The progress of the northern armies, the excitement of the 6th Army in view of the approaching decision and rumours of further happenings in the Sundgau had roused to fever heat my Army Staff's hopes of being at last set in motion on the signal from Main Headquarters. On August 17 the long-desired marching orders came in. The next day all the roads and tracks over the Sierck-Diedenhofen stretch of the line of the Moselle (the crossing of which was facilitated by new temporary bridges) were alive with interminable columns. The men, horses and transport of the numerous divisions, special formations and columns, had to cover the stages assigned to them to the very minute. Our task was to get five army corps by only three roads round north of Diedenhofen, through the narrow space between Bettemburg and Gross-Hettingen. In view of the uncertainty as to the enemy's



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whereabouts, a report of his approach might mean an action at any moment, so each division, in addition to supplies for current consumption, had to have enough ammunition, hospital and food supplies for an action lasting several days. The army must be ready for action at any moment and yet advance in left echelon in such a way that in its sweep to the left it remained the inviolable pivot of the marching wing of the whole German Army. As if that were not enough, the fortress of Longwy lay right in the track of our advance. So while our army corps swept past east and west of it, the assault and siege formations had to be incorporated in the march columns in such a way that they could automatically slip out of the line, get the hard nut in their grip and swiftly crush it by a mighty effort.

It was by such movements, timed to the minute, that by the evening of August 19 the leading columns of my army had reached the line Arlon-Künzich-Kail-Oettingen-Arweiler. The 5th A.C., from its concentration area on the Moselle, marched via Bettemburg-Mamer, the 13th A.C. via Bergem-Dippach, and the 16th A.C. via Diedenhofen-Gross Hettingen. Behind them, from the Nied, marched the 5th and 6th Reserve Corps, the first following the 5th A.C. as far as Bettemburg, while the 6th R.C., swerving left from the line of march of the 13th A.C., reached Kail, east of Esch. The marching orders for August 20 took a portion of the army round north of Longwy, the 5th A.C. to the Etalle-Chantemelle-Arlon sector, and the 13th A.C. to Châtillon-Rochecourt-Udange. The 6th R.C. pushed forward to Thil-Esch, while the 16th A.C. remained on its toes in the Oettingen-Arweiler area. For the next stage a direction south of Longwy was assigned to both corps. The 5th R.C. remained in second line on the Bettemburg-Arlon road, ready to be sent forward on both sides of Longwy.

In immediate touch with the 5th Army, the 6th A.C. of the 4th Army, on its right flank, had marched north of Arlon via Attert to Léglise-Neufchâteau. The 4th R.C. had been put under the orders of my army from August 18, but in its purely frontal field of action it was more and more hampered by the advance of the army itself.

A scheme of attack on Longwy appropriate to the general situation was not available. It had to be taken from the

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north instead of from the south, a more favourable direction. Under the command of Lieutenant-General Kämpfer, G.O.C. Engineers, at Army Headquarters, the assault detachment was concentrated, and set in motion from his headquarters at Niederkerschen, after careful personal reconnaissance by this experienced and extraordinarily courageous leader.

The detachment was composed of General von Teichmann's 52nd Infantry Brigade, two battalions of heavy field howitzers, and two battalions of the 12th Mortar Regiment, with ammunition columns, all drawn from the 13th A.C. and 6th R.C. and the army troops incorporated with them. The artillery was concentrated under the command of General von Malachowsky. To these were added the two-battalion 20th Pioneer Regiment, with its transport, and a pioneer company from the 13th A.C., with a searchlight train.

The fort was to be treated to such an overwhelming bombardment that its garrison would be forced underground, and our infantry could storm the work through the breaches with a minimum of loss. Under the protection of advanced parties of infantry, the artillery and pioneers carried out their careful reconnaissance work. Then the line of outposts of the Würtembergers thickened so as to cut the fort off completely on the north and north-east and cover the concentration of the heavy artillery behind the railway line east of Halancy. On August 21 the 122nd Infantry Regiment, on the right wing, advanced through Halancy-Piedmont, and won the Bois de Chadelle, while the 121st Infantry Regiment, on its left, advanced along the Luxemburg-Aubange-Longwy Road, stormed the village of St. Martin, and likewise pressed forward to within a few hundred metres of the fort.

The French were still defending themselves vigorously against the danger threatening them and the losses from their fire forced our infantry to go to ground. On the afternoon of the 21st, however, the dreadful concert of the mortars and howitzers opened with a crash. Our Swabian battalions could breathe more freely while the heavy high-explosive did its nerve-shattering work against the casements crammed with men and sweltering in the August heat. There was no doubt that we should reduce them: it was only a question of time. But would the enemy slip away?

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As early as August 17 the French, under General Pau, had again invaded German Sundgau from the Belfort gap. Their immense superiority ultimately enabled them to break the heroic counter-attack of the three Landwehr brigades which had been left there and once more to occupy the old Upper Alsatian industrial centre of Mülhausen. During the whole day of August 20 the rolling thunder of guns from the south-east and the endless buzz of the telephone announced the mighty battle in which the 6th and 7th Armies were engaged between the Delme and the Vosges. About 10.30 in the evening we had the official report of the brilliant victory that had been won over the enemy's army which was in retreat, leaving behind thousands of prisoners and countless material of all kinds.

The news of the victory, which was of such vital importance for the smooth development of the great German offensive, spread through Diedenhofen like wildfire and was received with mighty cheering and the strains of the "Wacht am Rhein." All anxiety as to the security of the German right flank had vanished, and all our resources were now at the service of the northern, strategic wing. By August 20 the triumphant advance of this wing had brought it approximately to the line Brussels-Namur-Neufchâteau-Longwy. Our right neighbour, the 4th Army, had forced its way through the wooded Belgian Ardennes, and its cavalry masses, strengthened by *jäger*, machine-gun detachments and horse artillery, had plunged deep into the unreconnoitred woods south of Neufchâteau. This manœuvre on our flank was an obstacle to the further march of the 5th Army, and also hampered our 3rd R.D. in its work of reconnaissance and veiling and covering our movements. The division was sent forward on Florenville via Jamoigne-Izel and protected by the advance guard of the 5th A.C. which was thrust forward to Sintigny. The 4th and 5th Armies were almost on the line Neufchâteau-Diedenhofen. The movements of the 5th Army in the neighbourhood of Diedenhofen depended upon the progress made by the 4th Army. A spirit of fraternal co-operation inspired all hearts. Our suspicion that a general advance on the part of the enemy was in progress appeared to be confirmed by the events at Mülhausen and on the front of the 6th Army, and by the reports of our cavalry of the air. But according

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to these reports, long columns were going north-east via Vouziers and Grand Pré, through the northern Argonne, and also northwards on both sides of the Meuse—*i.e.*, solely against the 4th Army. On August 20 no change had yet been reported in the movements of the enemy on the Othain sector of my army front.

# THE BATTLE OF LONGWY, AUGUST 22—25, 1914.









## CHAPTER II

### THE BATTLE OF LONGWY

**I**N a state of strained expectation my General Staff officers were in continuous telephone communication with all reconnoitring units, and the splendid flyers of the 25th Section at Diedenhofen soon won the gratitude and anxious sympathy of my sport-loving heart by the way they went out whenever they could. Among many others Lieutenants Gohring and Lorzor distinguished themselves by their exceptional keenness and smartness.

The steady pressure of the Corps Staffs on everyone engaged in reconnaissance work resulted in a steady flow of reports from the whole army front. The hard calling of the commander means that he must demand the apparently impossible in order to get the possible, though his heart beats warmly and anxiously for his men.

On August 21 the mass of enemy cavalry facing the 4th Army retired on Lacuisine through the forest south of Neufchâteau. Our 3rd R.D. had a stiff action, mainly with its brave Oelser Jäger against the French near Izel and Jamoigne. On the front of the 5th Army the hilly region of the Côtes Lorraines had come to life and shown our flyers columns of all arms advancing northwards. A general forward movement across the river Othain was in progress, and our cavalry posts were being driven in. Issue was joined. The enemy was attacking us.

The Chief of Staff of the Army, General Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, had considered all the possibilities in advance with his staff officers and the Deputy Chief of Staff. The enemy was now coming out into the open, advancing from Montmédy on Virton, Marville on Longuyon, Nouillon Pont and Eton on Mercy le Bas. Main Headquarters insisted on the

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necessity of the 5th Army remaining on the defensive, in view of the general situation, and awaiting the enemy's attack. This faced me with the first serious decision in this war, for we were convinced that we ought to attack ourselves. Our business was to get our attack on Longwy over and thereby evade the enemy's blow. The enemy's apparent scheme of pressing forward in the line of his barrier fortresses, Longwy and Montmédy, and then using them as *points d'appui* and thus making a breach in our army front must be nipped in the bud. It would be difficult to attain that object by standing on the defence, as was recommended in the orders from Main Headquarters. Our positions at the moment were well calculated to secure the safety of the resting troops massed thick behind them, but were not equal to the demands of a defensive battle. The army must gain ground in front for its deployment, and by making full use of the favourable conformation of the ground throw the enemy out of the valleys of the Chiers and Crusnes just as he was climbing out. Even if in so doing direct touch with Diedenhofen was neglected for the moment, the Metz-Diedenhofen fortress system offered sufficient strategic protection against any advance of the enemy within its effective zone. After my Chief of Staff had spoken several times on the telephone with Main Headquarters our views were ultimately approved, and I issued the order for the attack on the following day.

No great effort in the way of marching had been required of the troops of my army on August 21. For the intended attack, however, assembly by night was necessary. It was of vital importance for us to get out of the belt of woods ahead of us very early in the morning if we wished to secure the advantage of catching the enemy as he was coming out of the valley. The Corps Chiefs of Staff had to get their orders personally at Army Headquarters in Diedenhofen, so that all doubts could be cleared up in joint conference with the army leaders. I also issued the following Order of the Day: "Tomorrow morning I lead the army for the first time against the enemy. On other fronts prodigies of valour and heroic sacrifice have been performed by German troops. I am confident that we shall not fall behind our brothers."

The right wing of the army, the 5th A.C., was to advance from Etalle sur Semois on Virton, and to send out a flank

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guard in the direction of Florenville for the purpose of keeping the 4th and 5th Armies in touch. The protection of the right flank was not sufficiently secured by the 3rd Reserve Division, part of which had fought an indecisive action at Izel against a considerable force. For this purpose the left wing of the 4th Army had to attack in a southerly direction. Its 6th A.C., under General von Pritzelwitz, was still located in the Légglise-Thibesart sector. We sent a Staff Officer of the 5th A.C. there, and on his representations the 12th I.D. advanced on Rossignol and the 11th on Tintigny. Between the 6th A.C. and the 9th Division of the 5th A.C., which was marching on Virton with an open right flank, the 3rd R.D. had still a very broad gap to fill. East of the 9th I.D. the 10th was sent forward through Buzenol on Ethe. On its left the Würtemberg 13th A.C.—without its 52nd Infantry Brigade and Heavy Artillery, which were in action at Longwy—were advancing in the general direction Charency-Longuyon. The 27th I.D. therefore advanced from Chatillon through St. Leger-Bleide, and the 28th through Willancourt-Baranzy. The movements of these two northern Corps were completed by those of the others, from which they were separated by the Vauban fortress, which was to be rushed by the Kampfffer detachment after intense bombardment. The 6th R.C. had to attack south of it. On the plateau between the valleys of the Chiers and Baslieux it had to hold out a hand to the 13th A.C. for the purpose of isolating Longwy on the south, and therefore sent forward the 11th R.D. through Cutry and the 12th I.D. through Laix in the general direction Longuyon-Pierrepont.

The 5th R.C., previously the Army Reserve, had been brought up by forced marches by the Bettemburg-Capellen road, the 10th R.D. advancing on Crusnes through Holzen-Dippach-Esch, and the 9th R.D. on Aumetz, from Leuderlingen and Bettemburg. But an even greater strain was imposed upon it by being sent forward to Pierrepont-Joppécourt, where it was to take and hold the Crusnes sector. Thus were the gaps to be closed between the 6th R.C. and the 16th A.C., which, echeloned to the left, was to cover the left flank of the Army in such a way that the strategic connection with the fortified Moselle line was maintained. After consultation with the neighbouring 5th R.C., the 16th A.C. therefore started from the Aumetz-Fentsch line: its 34th I.D. advanced via

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Serrouville-Joppécourt, and its 33rd I.D. via Sancy-Anderny. Our object was to make it possible to envelop the hostile force attacking northwards over the Crusnes sector, and thereby inflict a decisive defeat upon it. To make the left flank of the Army on the Moselle front even more secure the 6th Cavalry Division was put under the orders of the 16th A.C., and we began to bring up troops from the Nied line and the Metz garrison.

At 6 a.m. on August 22 the Army Staff transferred its headquarters to Esch, in Luxemburg, so that it could keep in close touch with the Corps Staffs. All telephone communications had previously been concentrated in the school-house there. On the arrival of Army Headquarters this place—a medley of blast-furnaces, foundries and workmen's dwellings—was as busy as an ant-hill. The faces of the inhabitants and billetters expressed obvious annoyance that war should have visited their industrious neutral town, but our frank cordiality with them soon changed their frame of mind.

Between the piled-up benches of the schoolroom, adorned with pictures of animals on the walls, I, my Chief of Staff, and his assistants, Majors von Heymann and Matthias, set out the mighty struggle of almost 400,000 men on huge maps. Any change reported to us from the battlefield—a battlefield more than 60 miles long—immediately appeared on the map, and was transmitted to the neighbouring units as welcome news, a signal to go and help or a spur to their own activities. In cases where there was no telephone communication General Staff and Orderly Officers hastened in cars or on horseback to convey orders and bring back reports. The whole great apparatus worked without a hitch or a break. In addition to the Army Commander's immediate helpers, whom I have mentioned, all the officers of the Staff quickly took their places in the great organization as a good soldier's duty requires. My Chief of Staff, with the iron serenity born of his high sense of responsibility, had the tried and trusted Deputy Chief of Staff, General von Bieberstein, to relieve him of his duties other than the operations themselves. With his Section 1a he had the movements of the Corps and independent formations so thoroughly under control at any and every moment that he could always give me a clear picture of the battle situation on which to base our future decisions and orders.



## The Battle of Longwy

Unfortunately, the apparatus used by Main Headquarters for the transmission of reports and orders was not so well organized. The system of holding the reins lightly, for the purpose of promoting and preserving independence and a sense of responsibility, is not absolutely reprehensible *per se*, but even during the first days of our advance it occasionally led to a loss of touch, owing to the undue strain on the telegraphs. Main Headquarters was still in Coblenz, which was much too far back. Its instructions, conceived on broad, bold lines, certainly compelled the armies to such close co-operation that at first they seemed quite adequate. A perfect illustration of this was given on the right wing of the 5th Army, when the left wing of Duke Albrecht of Würtemberg's troops attacked in the direction we had requested.

### THE COURSE OF THE BATTLE ON AUGUST 22

When the short night gave place to the hot dawn of August 22 a thick fog lay over the modest school-house in which the Operations Staff was lodged, as well as over all the roads by which my divisions were joyfully marching to battle. Thus it was generally at the closest of close quarters that our advance guards established contact with the enemy, who was himself surprised in his approach. Our right neighbour, for example, the 12th I.D. of the 6th A.C., was attacking its immediate march objective, Rossignol, by ten o'clock, while the 11th I.D., on the other hand, encountered no obstacle in passing through Tintigny. Its scouts found Termes, St. Vincent and Belle-Fontaine occupied. Its leading regiment began the attack on Belle-Fontaine while the division deployed to the right, and from Tintigny enveloped the very superior enemy force at St. Vincent. As visibility improved the Silesian artillery put several batteries out of action, until both divisions were ready for infantry action. By about five o'clock in the afternoon they had taken Rossignol, St. Vincent and Belle-Fontaine; in the attack against the last village they were assisted by the Oelser Jäger of the 3rd R.D., from Ste. Marie. This regiment, to which I was particularly attached, joined in on its own initiative. The 6th A.C. had beaten the enemy at all points, but isolated parties of the French made their presence uncomfortably felt in the rear of the 5th A.C. Some time after six

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in the evening they attacked the Headquarters of the 5th A.C. in Etalle, and its G.S.O.1 broke off a report he was making to Army Headquarters with the words : "Excuse me a minute ; we're just being attacked by the French !" The enemy were taken prisoner, and Major Dove's remarkable report was very soon followed by an amusing explanation.

The continuous exchange of news with General von Strantz's 5th A.C. had given us the same impression as everywhere else, *i.e.*, that our troops were finding the fog a great obstacle. General von Below's 9th I.D., on the right wing, hastily collected its units which had been sent to support the 3rd C.D. in the neighbourhood of Ste. Marie, and came into contact with a strong enemy front on the heights between Robelmont and Virton. The Army Staff repeatedly drew the attention of the Corps Staffs to the right flank of the Army, which it was difficult for the 3rd C.D. to protect single-handed in view of the great extent of wooded ground and the incipient danger from the Meix-devant-Virton Road. After sending the 58th Infantry Regiment with a battery in the direction of the northern edge of Ribelmont, the division attacked from the Bois de Virton on both sides of the great road. The leading unit was the King's Grenadier Regiment, under the command of my brother Oscar, who displayed great discretion and coolness in this baptism of fire of his Silesian Grenadiers. But here again the eager infantry were deprived for a long time of its most effective auxiliary. In the thick fog artillery observation was impossible. Yet whenever the riflemen got a sight of the enemy, often only at close quarters, or came under his bursts of fire, they closed with him without a moment's hesitation.

To the strains of "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles !" the main body deployed, and soon after 10 a.m., when the fog had yielded to bright sunshine, it had strenuously fought its way west of the road between Bellevue and Virton. In the midst of a mighty artillery duel it beat off several counter-attacks, and with great effort forged onwards from the direction of Houdigny on to the ridge, where it established itself in the deserted enemy lines, in which his dead lay thick.

With even greater suddenness had the 50th Infantry Regiment of the 10th I.D. (the left neighbour of the 9th I.D.) found itself involved in a terrible struggle in the fog in the



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village of Ethe. Unfortunately the civil population participated, and this made necessary a careful deployment of the division north of the double village of Belmont-Ethe. The 47th Infantry Regiment, from the left, was sent against Laclaireau, and the 19th Infantry Brigade, from the right, against Belmont. By midday the Corps Commander reported that both villages were in our occupation. The action was particularly sanguinary at this point. As I subsequently ascertained for myself, it had cost the enemy's infantry and artillery frightful losses, and the same was unfortunately true of ourselves. With a view to reorganizing its units, the victorious division withdrew its lines behind the battered villages of Belmont-Ethe in the evening, when there was no further threat from the enemy. Our hundreds of brave dead included several battalion commanders and their capable G.S.O., Major Aubert.

As in the case of the 6th and 5th Corps, Army Headquarters used its means of communication with the Staffs of the 5th and 13th Corps to secure that both Headquarters should be in the closest touch during the action, notwithstanding all the difficulties of the ground. In the valley of the Ton one battalion of the enterprising Württembergers had carried out a 15-kilometre reconnaissance as far as Virton on the previous day. It had thus discovered the advance of the French across the Basse-Vire sector. On August 22 the enemy was already established on the heights north of the villages of Bleid, Mussy la Ville and Baranzy, when the Swabian Uhlan patrols were feeling their way forward along the fog-shrouded roads. General von Fabeck wanted to throw the enemy back over the Virton-Halanzy railway. On the right he sent General Count von Pfeil's 27th I.D. against the enemy front, between the Ton Valley and Mussy la Ville (inclusive), while the Duke of Urach's 26th I.D. was to extend to the left and press forward against Ville Houdlemont.

From the sector of this Corps also the telephone brought us reports charged with the certainty of victory and speaking well for the iron will of the Commander. About 10 a.m. the attack began along the whole front, and as early as 1 p.m. the enemy, fighting desperately, had been thrown back by the splendid co-operation of all arms. After storming the villages of Bleid, Mussy la Ville and Baranzy, the battalions

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reorganized in order to exploit their victory by a vigorous pursuit, which was continued until darkness came down and marked by a continuous series of isolated actions. The splendid achievement of the 13th A.C. had exceeded even the high expectations of the Army Staff when the line that had been reached, Grandcourt-Tellancourt-the neighbourhood of Villers la Chèvre, could be marked down on the map.

Meanwhile the Army Staff had been waiting long and anxiously for news of events at Longwy, as the impression of the heavy bombardment had led us to hope for its speedy fall. As we failed entirely to get into touch with Kämpfer's Detachment, my personal Aide-de-Camp, Major von Müller, was sent in the afternoon to Niederkerschen-Aubange-Halanzy to clear the situation up thoroughly. When he got to Halanzy he learned that Teichmann's Infantry Brigade had suffered heavy losses in a very violent hostile attack at Romain, and had received orders to reassemble at Halanzy. As he continued to search for General Kämpfer's headquarters in the neighbourhood of the wood, north of Longwy, and was following a telephone wire laid in that direction, all the nerve-shaking scenes in the rear of a modern battle offered themselves to his vision.

General Kämpfer regarded the intervention of the 52nd Infantry Brigade as a mistake, and had also received a report of the approach of a strong enemy column in the valley of the Chiers. He thought it must already have reached Longwy la Basseville. He was therefore anxious about his artillery and the performance of his task.

Major von Müller was able to tell him of the victorious progress of the 13th and 6th Reserve Corps on both sides of Longwy. The longed-for relief was thus bound to come and the Detachment would successfully survive its critical situation. What had happened? It was quite true that the enemy had very smartly attempted the relief of his fortress by an infantry attack, supported by powerful artillery, from the Chiers Valley via Lexy against Romain. To meet this threat General von Teichmann had brought up a substantial portion of his Brigade from its previous siege lines and sent it southwest, so that the ridge along the Romain-"Bel Arbre" (unoccupied work) road could be held in any eventuality. After a severe struggle and very heavy losses on both sides the

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position at Bel Arbre work remained in our hands, but the Brigade needed to reorganize its scattered units out of range of hostile action before it was fit to resume its original task. In view of this critical situation the Army Staff's satisfaction over the dashing advance of the 13th A.C. to the Tellancourt-Villers la Chèvre road was particularly great. The performance of the 6th R.C. deprived the enemy of any prospect whatever of sending help to his eyrie at Longwy.

General von Gossler, Commanding the 6th R.C., had just deployed his divisions between Haucourt and Bréhain la Ville when he received the important news of the enemy's thrust towards Longwy from the south. From Haucourt and Villers la Montagne he therefore sent forward the 11th R.D. via Cutry-Chénières, and on its left the 12th R.D. via Laix, to take the threatening hostile operation in the flank. General Surén's 11th R.D. diminished the force of this operation against Romain by attracting considerable bodies of the enemy to itself in the neighbourhood of Lexy and especially Cutry. After a successful action this division forced its way forward to and south of Cons la Grandville-Ugny, and beat off violent counter-attacks with great tenacity and resolution. By the evening it and the 26th I.D. of the 13th A.C. on the other bank formed the highly defensible double gate which closed the Valley of the Chiers.

The 12th R.D., however, suffered the same fate as befell the enemy, thanks to the movement of the 11th R.D. After its advance from Joppécourt through Laix and Baslieux it was menaced on its left flank: nor could it overcome the superior enemy force facing it in an action east of Doncourt. In the afternoon the approaching 10th R.D. of the 5th R.C. attracted to itself part of the hostile force which was threatening the 12th R.D.'s flank, and also gave it direct help by sending two regiments across the Baslieux ravine into the woods south-west of that village. Yet the action in which the 12th R.D. was involved remained indecisive, so that in the evening its commander, General von Lüttwitz, found himself compelled by heavy losses to reorganize his units further back in lines west of Laix. This operation was carried out without interference by the enemy.

General von Gündell, commanding the 5th R.C., had announced the arrival of the leading units of his division in the line ordered, Crusnes-Aumetz, as early as 9 a.m. Our Reserve

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Divisions had already given brilliant proof of their capabilities in marching, and there was no doubt about their fighting quality. General von Wartenberg's 10th R.D. was engaged in its advance on Pierrepont and already involved in a struggle for Ville au Montois when, as has been said, it sent off the two regiments of different brigades, to assist the 6th R.C. in its peril. Yet, notwithstanding very difficult conditions and exhausting house-to-house fighting, it also performed its own allotted task, inasmuch as by the evening it was in possession of Pierrepont and Brismont and thus commanded the Crusnes valley. The 9th R.D. of General von Guretzky-Cornitz had cleared the way through Fillières for its neighbour, the 34th I.D. of the 16th A.C. Portions of it now took up the pursuit of the enemy towards Ville au Montois. Simultaneously it helped the weakened 10th R.D. on its right to bring its severe struggle for the possession of the village to a successful conclusion in the evening. Other portions of the 9th R.D. combined with units of the 34th I.D. to take Joppécourt after storming the heights lying in front of it. The 5th R.C. had swiftly and smoothly carried out the work assigned to it.

On the front of the Metz Corps of General von Mudra the 6th C.D. had been reconnoitring, and as early as August 21 reported isolated movements from the Othain to Mercy le Bas and Landres. It had had hand-to-hand fighting with the enemy at Murville. General von Mudra therefore anticipated severe fighting on his front and left flank, to protect which, in addition to the 6th C.D., he had the 66th Infantry Brigade echeloned to the left and behind his direction of attack. I was particularly glad to have this judicious and energetic General under my command on the most important wing. In the days of peace I had known and esteemed him, both as a soldier and good judge of the political situation in the Reichsland. The General was immensely respected by his Corps, and in many years of service as my immediate subordinate he always proved himself my loyal adviser and brother-in-arms.

The 68th Infantry Brigade, advancing through Audun le Roman, had to fight hard for Fillières and the enemy positions east of Joppécourt before it had that village in its possession. At 9 a.m. the rest of General Heinemann's 34th I.D. was sent forward to attack Malavillers. South of it the 67th Infantry Brigade was deployed through Sancy. One of its regiments



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occupied Anderny and pushed forward through Murville-Bouvillers without being involved in any heavy fighting. It was not before the evening that, as the results of reports from the 6th C.D., protecting the left army flank, the Corps Commander could feel certain that no danger was threatening in that quarter. While three regiments of the 34th I.D. were fighting for Mercy le Haut, the 33rd I.D., under General von Reitzenstein, was sent in to the attack via Higny-Prentin in a north-westerly direction. A decision in our favour was thus forced, but unfortunately not before the late evening. The 34th I.D. stormed Mercy le Haut, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy. It spent the night south of Joppécourt, where it re-established contact with its 68th Infantry Brigade. The 33rd I.D. followed up the retreating foe as far as west of Xivry Circourt.

By the evening we at Army Headquarters were quietly conscious of the great victory that had been won along practically the whole of our line. But after the tremendous nerve strain of our work of collecting and transmitting reports and issuing orders without a break, and the alternations of anxiety and satisfaction it involved, our minds were obsessed by grave reflections. Our happy consciousness of certain victory struggled with dark anticipations of the huge sacrifices it must have cost our brave army. Among my immediate Staff there was no place for rejoicing.

On the faith of the final reports from the various Corps Staffs, my Headquarters informed Main Headquarters of our check to the enemy's offensive and our intention, for August 23, of at first remaining on the line we had won.

The bombardment of Longwy was to be continued and we should reorganize our formations, fill up our ammunition supplies and clear up the battlefield. We intended to wait for the arrival of the five Landwehr brigades from the Nied line (which had now become of no importance) to reinforce the left wing of my army.

The situation with the enemy and our neighbouring armies was uncertain. Of course the exploitation of our victory was the *leitmotiv* of all discussions and proposals at Army Headquarters. But my army's function of a pivot against the enemy's strong fortified camp at Verdun imposed restraints from which only Main Headquarters itself could release us. Thus, the purpose of the steps we took this night was to make

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the army fit for action and ready to meet any eventualities. Its left flank offered the enemy an enticing bait for a counter-attack, and orders were therefore issued to the Landwehr Brigades (which had been carefully prepared for their new task), with the heavy artillery allotted to them and the Metz Main Reserve, to hasten their arrival. By August 23 the 43rd and 45th Landwehr Brigades were to reach Landres and place themselves at the disposal of the 16th A.C. General Franke, with his Landwehr Brigades (9th Bavarian, 13th Prussian and 53rd Württemberg), was given Briey, and the Metz Main Reserve (33rd R.D., reinforced), under General Bausch, Conflans, as march objectives.

During the night of the 22nd, the 6th C.D., from the left wing of the army, reported that the enemy was in flight to the Meuse. The Corps reports presented the picture of the retreat of a large number of isolated enemy units in great disorder, so that it seemed that there was no directing will at work among the enemy. No report of any importance had been received from the 3rd C.D., on the right wing of the army. This unit was therefore given a free hand to carry out its task of rejoining its Higher Cavalry Commander No. 4 on the left wing the moment it ascertained that, in view of the situation on the right wing, there was no more work for it in that quarter.

### AUGUST 23

On August 23 the following order arrived from Main Headquarters :

"The 5th Army has freedom of movement. I want the enemy driven back from north to west past Verdun. Several French Corps are in action on the front of the 4th Army. German right wing advancing swiftly in a southerly direction. Signed : von Moltke."

We had the freedom of movement for which we were longing. Beginning with the left, the more important wing of the army, detailed orders were issued, based on the view that the enemy in that quarter was in flight to the Meuse. "Our whole object is by a vigorous pursuit to head him off northwards from Verdun and complete yesterday's victory."

After the Chiers-Crusnes sector our first business appeared to be the occupation of the line of the Othain, the left bank of



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which had been fortified, according to our reports, from the start. The 16th A.C. was accordingly sent forward to Nouillon Pont-Spincourt, and the 6th C.D. to continue the pursuit through Spincourt to Damvillers. The 5th R.C. was at first to remain behind in reserve on the Crusnes and be called up later ; the 6th R.C. was to reach St. Laurent-Pillon and the 13th A.C. to continue the pursuit via Charancy-Longuyon to Marville-Rupt sur Othain. The 5th A.C. was to remain behind at first. It was to be available to support, if necessary, the left wing of the army, to isolate Montmédy and bring up its heavy mortars to bombard that place. Further arrangements for the attack on Montmédy were suspended. It was hoped to reduce Longwy first, and for that purpose assistance from the 5th A.C. was at General Kämpfer's disposal.

The exploitation of the success gained the previous day was in progress. After our hectic work, to the accompaniment of the incessant ringing of telephone bells, the baking schoolroom in Esch enjoyed comparative peace. But victory and pursuit winged our thoughts. How the exciting reports lingered in our ears ! "The village is taken." "We've reached the road." "All's going well." "We're advancing." Unforgettable hours. How often in the times of thrice-cursed trench-warfare did we long for those wonderful days of open warfare ! "

From His Majesty the Emperor arrived the following telegram : "Congratulations on the first victory which, with God's help, you have won so splendidly. I award you Iron Cross, Classes I and II. Convey to your brave troops my thanks and those of the Fatherland. Well done ! I'm proud of you. Your affectionate father, Wilhelm."

The following telegram from my father was sent on : "To Prince Oscar of Prussia, King's Grenadiers, via Esch. Bravo, my boy."

Deeply moved by this expression of imperial and fatherly gratitude, I gave my Chief and immediate Staff the telegram to read. The consciousness of the Emperor and Highest War Lord's appreciation was the greatest reward every officer and man asked for the loyal performance of duty. Pride, tempered with modesty, at having honourably helped towards the victory was the prevailing sentiment of all those present in the little room, and my Chief of Staff, usually a stranger to emotion, was

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very moved as he handed me back the telegram. I replied : " Warmest thanks for your congratulations and signal honour, which makes me proud and happy. I owe them primarily to my splendid Chief of Staff and his helpers and to the bravery of my troops. I will convey to them your thanks and those of the Fatherland, and ask you to bestow some honour at once on Lieutenant-General Schmidt von Knobelsdorf and Majors von Heymann and Matthias. We hope to-day's victory will bring further successes. Best wishes and once more heartfelt thanks."

And then I left all my maps and took my car over the battle-fields to visit my troops. I did so because I was overwhelmed by the feeling that a commander and his men are one, and because I could not resist the impulse, to-day of all days, to hold out a grateful hand to my brave comrades on the long battle-front. Yesterday the Commander's iron sense of duty had kept me tied and bound to my headquarters.

What manifold impressions flashed on my mind during those hours. Hours I shall not forget while life lasts. As far as the eye could reach burning and smouldering villages and hamlets formed so many giant lurid landmarks on the wretched countryside. The roads were blocked by ammunition columns, which had rushed to bring their batteries what they most needed for victory and had been overtaken by the winged messengers which sow death and destruction. Through them marched columns of tired, sad-faced prisoners, conducted by joyous German soldiers with sparkling eyes. More and more piteous became the pictures of human misery ; the reverse side of the medal of victory presented itself mercilessly to sympathetic eyes. Dead and severely wounded men lay all round, a dreadful contrast to the harvest-fields and green meadows smiling in the summer sun. In the dressing-stations our medical officers, doctors and stretcher-bearers were working tirelessly and devotedly amid a terrible concentration of human misery. On the faces of the victims, however, lay an expression of proud satisfaction and the consciousness of having come through the hardest test of their loyalty to duty as a good German should.

I went on further. Men with less serious wounds were hobbling about, and cheered me as I passed. Everywhere men and officers crowded round me with merry faces, glowing with the heat. Dusty and grimy, in torn and bloody uniforms, they stretched out their hands to me. I should have liked to clasp

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them all in gratitude for our common successful efforts, but I published the Emperor's thanks to my brave 5th Army far and wide. It was only now, in the midst of my splendid troops, that I really tasted the holy joys of the first and finest victory.

Then we went on to what had been the French lines on the previous day. In the shallow trenches whole companies lay dead in their gay uniforms and bright red trousers, which have cost thousands of lives in these days of green meadows and yellow corn. On the heights and in the ploughed fields lay rows of shattered French batteries, some of them with their guns turned completely over. Among them lay the gunners, dead in the devoted and ardent performance of their duties, and the stiff corpses of the teams, torn to shreds in the most terrible way. Our march columns engaged in the pursuit could be seen everywhere, tired and hot, but proud and happy. "There's the Crown Prince! Hurrah! The Crown Prince!" resounded along the roads. With a grateful heart I greeted my brave troops, and found it difficult to conceal my emotion.

In a village which was a mere shattered wreck, the aged Field-Marshal Count Haeseler, a link between a glorious past and the proud present, was at the headquarters of the 16th A.C. The soldier in him had been stronger than his frail old age. He wanted to see the brave Corps at work that had once been his own.

Then we came back in the summer night. Distant thunder of cannon, burning villages, marching columns and camp fires—a day of stupendous and unforgettable impressions.

Meanwhile, all the reports of the day had been received and collated at Army Headquarters. They all showed that the determination to secure a decision certainly inspired our leaders, and had taken them sometimes into the very front line, but that reconnaissance work had been hampered by the fog and a swift and smooth advance by the resistance of the enemy's rear-guards. In addition, the troops who had been working on the defences of the newly-acquired line until far into the night had not realized the scale of their victory, and as the result of their substantial losses, particularly in junior officers and N.C.O.'s, they were largely left to themselves until the next day. Precious time was lost before the energy of their new leaders triumphed over the mental exhaustion of the battered units.

On the right wing the task of the 5th A.C. for this day

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must be confined to waiting in patience, and the events in the sector of its right neighbour, the 6th A.C., had compelled us to hold tight to yesterday's line, Robelmont-St. Mard-Latour. Of the 13th A.C., two columns of the 27th I.D. reached Allondrelle and Villancy, and the 26th I.D. Longuyon via Montigny sur Chiers. To this little town, with its important railway nexus, buried deep in the Chiers valley, advanced the leading columns of the 11th R.D. of the 6th R.C. While the 13th A.C., on the right of the great road, guarded us via Noërs, the 6th R.C. had sent forward its outposts to the southern edge towards Sorbey. The 12th R.D. successfully fought its way into Doncourt and Beuveille. The 5th R.C. joined hands with the 34th I.D. via St. Supplet, and in the evening the 33rd I.D. was in three groups between Ollières and Domprix. Further left the 43rd and 45th Landwehr Brigades were following in the neighbourhood of Landres, the 6th R.D. near Jondreville, Lieutenant-General Franke's composite Landwehr Division near Briey, and the 33rd R.D. from Metz near Conflans.

We had therefore gained a good deal of ground on August 23. Many small individual actions and the hostile attitude of the civil population in a few localities gave the day the character of guerrilla warfare. We became certain that we were faced with serious fighting on the Othain sector. Air reconnaissance showed large bodies of troops in the villages of Mangiennes and Billy, and columns were seen marching on Spincourt, Eton and Etain.

My Army Staff assumed these columns were the last mobile reserve from the Fortress of Verdun. To head them off from their line of march in a north-westerly direction and throw them back on the Meuse, with the whole of the enemy's Verdun Army, was thus our *leitmotiv* for August 24, and so our original battle plan was enlarged to a scheme for the double envelopment of the foe.

In order to have a strong left wing for the southern arm of the pincers, Franke's Landwehr Division and the 33rd R.D. were placed at the disposal of the 16th A.C. and set in motion, the first from Briey on Boulogny, and the latter from Conflans on Gondrecourt. The corps already had under its orders the two Landwehr Brigades, the 43rd and 45th, at Landres. With these reinforcements it was to attack from the Eton-Amel line against the flank of the hostile force we assumed to be



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in the Othain position, while its active divisions were simultaneously to attack frontally from Nouillon Pont-Gouraincourt. On its right the 5th R.C. had to advance from the line Boismont-Mercy-le-Bas to Les Eurantes-St. Pierre-villers. It was to form the link between the force from the reinforced 16th A.C., which was to envelop on the south, and the northern wing of the army. The latter had to force the strong Chiers-Crusnes sector, its 6th R.C. attacking partly through Beuveille-Pierre-pont, and partly with the 26th I.D. through Longuyon. The 13th A.C. was allotted the Villette-Colmey sector of the stream. The 5th A.C. was to keep out of range of Montmédy—which was to be left alone for the time being—come up through Ruette-Charency and intervene in the action.

A day of tense excitement dawned, the day on which the enemy's resistance was to be broken, under the pressure of the 16th A.C. in the north and the 5th A.C. and 13th A.C. in the south, and his defeat completed by envelopment.

### AUGUST 24

On the 24th August the 5th A.C. had no easy task, so far as marching was concerned. It had only one road for its advance. In concert with the 10th I.D. it took Epiez, and in the evening the 6th Grenadiers stormed Charency and Vezin. The enemy abandoned the Chiers sector and retired on Marville. The 9th I.D., in the rear, remained in Ruette. But this day it was impossible to carry out the order from Army Headquarters to press forward in the Marville-Jametz direction, a movement which would have given effective support to the 13th A.C., and also have been of vital importance for the ultimate decision. The fighting advance of the 27th I.D. over the open slopes of the northern bank and the difficult Chiers sector took the Würtembergers the whole day. It was only towards evening that our advance guards, pressing forward through Villette and Colmey, appeared on the southern bank, and relieved the 26th I.D. south of Longuyon. This division, with the 11th R.D., had held our outpost lines with the utmost intrepidity, while the whole malignant fury of the fanatical inhabitants of Longuyon was let loose on the main body of the two divisions which were following up. Treacherously and perfidiously shot at from doors, windows

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and roofs, our troops were involved in street and house-to-house fighting of the most savage description. Its memory will long outlast the war! Yet the irresistible élan of our men brought first the 51st Infantry Brigade and then the 11th R.D. (the latter passing round the town on the left) through the dangerous defile to the heights, though at the cost of serious losses. There the enemy's fierce attacks died down before the intervention of our reinforcements. Fighting no less fierce faced the 12th R.D. of the 6th R.C. in its struggle for Arrancy, which had been converted into a small fortress. Enveloped from north and south, the village was not stormed until the 5th R.C. intervened with its artillery from the Bois de Sérapt. Here the 10th R.D. began its attack from Han devant Pierrepont and the 9th R.D. from St. Supplet. In violent fighting, which continued well into the night, and was rich in examples of heroic personal intervention on the part of officers of the highest rank, the corps won the Bois Deffoy and Remenoncourt Farm.

By the evening the northern wing of the army was on a line from Vezin (5th A.C.), through Petit Xivry-Noërs (13th A.C.)-Le Haut Bois-Bellefontaine Farm (6th R.C.)-Bois Deffoy-Remenoncourt Farm-St. Pierrevillers (5th R.C.). The corps were firmly established on the southern bank of the Chiers-Crusnes sector. If the southern army wing succeeded in rolling up the enemy's Othain position from the south, and continuing its attack so as to wheel towards the great Pillon-Mangiennes road, the foe's defeat was sealed.

In close touch with the 5th R.C. on the south, the 16th A.C. sent its 34th I.D. from Ollières and Réchicourt towards Nouillon Pont-Spincourt, and its 33rd I.D. from Dompriz towards Houdelaucourt-Domrémy. Late in the evening very heavy fighting, which fluctuated continuously owing to repeated French counter-attacks, gave the corps possession of the eastern bank of the Othain from Duzey to Domrémy, thanks to the excellent co-operation of its watchful artillery with the storming infantry.

After other arrangements had been made for the command in Metz, the Governor, General von Oven, was placed at the head of the reinforcements assigned to the 16th A.C. But, with a view to securing single command on the southern wing, he received his orders from the 16th A.C. The 43rd



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and 45th Landwehr Brigades needed a rest, and had accordingly remained in the neighbourhood of Landres. In the afternoon, after a tiring march from Briey, Franke's Landwehr Division broke the enemy's resistance at Gondrecourt, and, encouraged by its success, advanced north-west on both sides of the Othain ravine. There was then a fierce struggle for the heights east of Eton, and an extreme effort had its reward with the storming of the burning village. The division had established touch through Domrémy with the Active Corps (33rd I.D.) in the very front line, and opened the thrust into the enemy's flank. On its left, the 33rd R.D., coming up through Béchamp from Conflans, had itself been involved in heavy fighting for the fringes of the Bois de Rouvres and the burning village of Rouvres. After a stubborn struggle, which lasted for hours, the 66th Reserve Brigade gained the upper hand, drove the wavering enemy even out of his strong points, Sebastopol Farm and Longran Farm, and by the evening was in possession of Amel. The Divisional Commander had made his Bavarian Active Brigade follow up, echeloned to the left. When it had taken Rosa Farm, south of Rouvres, our previous anxiety about the menace to our own flank from the left became a certainty, with the report that enemy infantry in open order were approaching Etain-Warcq from a south-westerly direction. The brigade wheeled to the left, and its neighbour, the 6th C.D., even further to the left, and subsequently the enemy advanced against them through Gussainville. The 4th Regiment of the brave 8th Bavarian Brigade fought for Etain, with the 8th Regiment on its left. On the right, in the wood north of Etain, a battalion of the 66th Reserve Brigade had established touch. The enemy flank attack was beaten off. Our aeroplanes reported a withdrawal.

When night fell the situation was considered favourable by the troops of the wing which had been attacked and the Headquarters Staff of the 16th A.C. By way of precaution, General von Mudra sent the 43rd and 45th Landwehr Brigades from Landres to Béchamp, to reinforce the menaced flank. I decided to persevere with the original plan—*i.e.*, to call in the 16th A.C. and head off the enemy on our front in a north-westerly direction through Billy towards Pillon-Mangiennes. To that end Oven's Corps must cover the flank and rear of the 16th A.C. against the threat from Verdun. For this

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purpose the 6th C.D. was still placed under the orders of the 16th A.C.

AUGUST 25

During the whole night of August 24 the guns never ceased to thunder. The moment the fourth day of the battle dawned fighting began again with renewed violence. Both Staffs and troops were certainly inspired by the iron will to conquer, in the sure and certain conviction that this battle of giants was approaching a vital issue. The French, fighting with the devotion of despair, seemed to have realized the whole seriousness of their position. As regards equipment and *moral*, the many prisoners we took made an excellent impression.

But after the uninterrupted efforts of the last hard days, how would our Reserve and Landwehr formations on the southern wing come through the ordeal of another hostile attack? My Army Staff had looked ahead, and left no stone unturned to strengthen this wing in every possible way. Its main support was the Fortress of Metz. Through Metz the 10th Ersatz Division, detached from the 6th Army, was sent from Delme via Cerny to Ars, where, with the assistance of the railway, one infantry brigade lay ready for action in the evening of the 25th, and the rest early in the morning of the 26th. From the ring forts of the stronghold the Deputy-Governor, General Pelkmann, sent five further battalions and a heavy howitzer battery to Conflans. Von Unger's 3rd C.D., which was expected in the neighbourhood of Oettingen this day, in the course of its transfer from the right to the left wing of the army, received orders to join up at the earliest possible moment with the Higher Cavalry Commander No. 4 at Mouaville.

The precautions taken by the Army Headquarters Staff were justified. Its air scouts, whose activities were indefatigable, soon cleared up any doubts as to what the French were doing, particularly on the Etain-Conflans part of the Ornes sector. Strong columns of all arms from the direction of the Côtes Lorraines, east of Verdun, and from the south, were extending ever further east towards Conflans and delivering violent attacks against Owen's Corps, which was bravely resisting. The brunt of the attack fell upon the splendid Bavarian Brigade of the 33rd R.D., between Etain and Lanbères. On

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its left wing it was supported by the 45th and 43rd Landwehr Brigades, the 6th C.D. and a battalion of its own brigade, intercalated in that quarter. Further north, the rest of the 33rd R.D. was fighting in and south of the Serron-Amel line, against strong enemy attacks from the invisible depths of the extensive woods. Hours of intense strain at Army Headquarters and the Headquarters of the 16th A.C., which was immediately concerned, passed in a lively alternation of confidence and doubt. Would the southern wing hold firm against the enemy's onslaught, so that the process of enveloping the enemy we had beaten the previous day could be completed? With iron resolution we continued to follow the high aim we had set for ourselves, and only Franke's Landwehr Division was fetched back from the thrust from Eton against Gouraincourt in order to stiffen the southern wing yet more.

Far away in the rear of our army, our heavy artillery pounded away mercilessly at the underground shelters of Longwy's garrison, who had long been condemned to inactivity and silent endurance. After the sanguinary action at Roman on August 22 had thinned the ranks, Kämpffer's Assault Detachment had been reinforced by a light howitzer section from the 13th A.C. and an infantry regiment from the 5th R.C.

General von Mudra's two active divisions continued their enveloping movement, fighting hard all the way, from the Duzey-Spincourt-Houdelaucourt sector of the Othain line towards the Pillon-Mangiennes road. The 33rd I.D. to the south captured Vandoncourt and Muzeray, and north of it the 34th I.D. fought for the eastern fringe of Warpremont Wood. The 5th R.C. pressed forward on both sides of Rouvrois to the great Arrancy-Pillon road. There it established contact with the 6th R.C., which had pushed through the woods to the north. We had no anxiety about the situation here or that of the Würtembergers further north and the 5th A.C.; our promising pursuit and the fighting it involved were going well for us. But menacing reports from the southern wing began to come in thick and fast.

Instead of taking in flank and decisively defeating the enemy forces pressing forward through Romagne sous les Côtes and Azannes to Mangiennes and Billy, we found ourselves compelled with heavy hearts to stand on the defensive! Our

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unsupported army flank on the Orne sector was threatened once more. And, to crown all, the fortitude of our Landwehr began to give out. First the 43rd and then parts of the 45th Landwehr Brigade retired through Lanhères-Béchamp towards Fléville, while the enemy pushed forward further east through Boncourt towards Thuméréville and pressed back the 6th C.D. as well. Confusion and the precipitate retreat of the retiring columns and trains were the result.

The G.O.C. 16th A.C. saw that the more his Corps became involved in action with the fresh troops reported on his front the more must he be hampered in his decisions and movements. In view of the menacing situation on the left army wing this consideration moved him to withdraw the two divisions of the Corps. He contemplated the radical solution of a wholesale retirement of his entire force from the segment Bois de Warpremont through Senon-Etain-Conflans to a shorter line in the rear behind the Othain.

My Army Staff in Esch, less familiar with the actual features of the battle, could not at first agree with this view of the 16th A.C. We were building on the heroic stand of General Riedl's Bavarian Brigade at Rouvres, which had steadfastly beaten off all hostile attacks. We relied on the approaching relief from Metz, which was bound to have its effect on the Conflans area. Moreover, we were convinced at heart that the enemy's south to north attack so near to our strongest German fortress must inevitably lose most of its force on the mere appearance of our forces from that quarter.

An orderly officer was therefore sent from the Chief of Staff personally, with the following instructions: "Take the fastest car you can get to the 16th A.C. The Corps must stand fast, whatever happens, and then the enemy's attack will collapse!"

Although a Staff Officer was sent with this order (unfortunately only a verbal one), on account of its special importance, a malicious fate influenced everything we did on this nerve-racking day. The messenger seems to have lost his nerve. At any rate, the manner in which he carried out his mission created the impression in the minds of General von Mudra's Staff that he was bringing the news that our attack was collapsing on the whole front! Wild rumours circulating among the retreating motor transport had robbed the officer of any



## The Battle of Longwy

power to think quietly. His appearance at the headquarters of the 16th A.C. was followed by the circulation of a definitive order to withdraw the entire southern wing to the approximate line Nouillon Pont-Réchicourt-Avillers-Landres-Mairy. When the temporarily interrupted telephone communication reported that this movement had already begun I and my Operations Staff found ourself faced with a terrible mental conflict. The promising and carefully prepared double envelopment of the enemy army we had beaten the previous day, by extending our right wing through Marville-Delut and our left through Billy-Mangiennes, had become impossible so far as the latter was concerned. The hostile masses had thereby recovered their freedom of movement. Instead of destroying them in a Cannae and driving their remnants against the Meuse north of Verdun, we had to leave them their line of retreat to the protecting zone of their fortress.

The difficult operation of breaking away from the enemy, in which General von Mudra's men were engaged, could not have been contemplated had it not been for the splendid generalship of their commander and the proved capacity of the troops to manœuvre, even in the most trying situation. My Army Staff was compelled to take the disagreeable view that to issue counter-orders when the movement was already in progress could only produce fatal confusion. We therefore approved this experienced general's action. Under cover of the 33rd I.D., which remained in its lines from and south of Muzeray-Vandoncourt to the Othain, he therefore began by withdrawing the 34th I.D. from the front. It was to retire through Réchicourt and form a solid nucleus for the new line of resistance on the heights between Avillers and Landres. The portions of the 33rd R.D. which were fighting in the Serron-Amel area had to fall back on this line in the general direction Réchicourt-Avillers. All the rest of Owen's Corps in touch with the 34th I.D. was then to retire to the line Landres-Mairy.

To compensate for the absence of the 34th I.D. from the front line Army Headquarters ordered the 5th R.C. to occupy Nouillon Pont, Muzeray and the Bois de Warpremont, and the 6th R.C. to occupy Pillon. But the news of the course of events on the southern wing of the Army had had in a certain sense a paralysing effect on the whole front, so that in the evening only the advanced troops of the 6th R.C. stood on



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the heights south of the Othain, mainly between St. Laurent-Sorbey. Yet the enemy retreated !

On the right of the 6th R.C. the 13th A.C. secured the crossing of the river sector with its 27th I.D. through Petit and Grand Faily. Breaking all local resistance, it forced its adversary through Grand Faily Woods and over the little stream, Loison. After using its heavy mortars, the 5th A.C. attacked from the line Villers le Rond-Petit Faily and captured the fortress-like Marville, towering over the Othain valley. But our promising pursuit came to a standstill here also. The enemy retired to the Loison in the direction of Jametz, and got away safely. I cannot say whether this was due to the same sort of paralysis produced by the rumours of the crisis on our left wing, which in some mysterious way had soon reached even our extreme right wing. However that may be, we could not resist a feeling that the command on the northern wing had lacked the necessary resolution to carry out the orders it had received, in view of the admittedly great exhaustion of the men. The outposts of the 5th A.C. covered us against the Montmédy-Jametz line on both sides of the river Othain.

Below Montmédy the 4th Army had reached the Chiers at La Ferté and Olizy with its 6th A.C.

### THE END OF THE BATTLE

Our painful renunciation of the hopes of even greater victories for our Army was coupled with continuous anxiety at Headquarters about the success of the movement of the left wing to break away from the enemy. Reports of poor marching performances and confusion among the transport had reached us in Esch. Then salvation came with a report that the Deputy-Governor of Metz had taken Conflans with his detachment, and that Riedl's Bavarian Brigade was still holding its far-flung lines east and west of Rouvres. The enemy's pressure, the extent of which had no doubt been over-estimated, relaxed ; his attack had come to a standstill. This view of the Governor was soon further confirmed by the reports of the 16th A.C., so that our dispositions for August 26 now had a firm starting-point. General von Mudra had to dispose his

## The Battle of Longwy

troops on the line we contemplated, Muzeray-Spincourt-Landres-Mairy, in such a way that the Active Corps on the right wing and Oven's Corps on the left came to a standstill. An order was issued to Hollen's Cavalry Corps, whose 3rd C.D. had not yet joined the 6th owing to the exhaustion of the horses and difficulties with regard to shoeing, to reconnoitre on the 26th August in a westerly and south-westerly direction through the line Conflans-Mars la Tour-Chambley.

On the immediate right of the 16th A.C. was the 5th R.C., between Muzeray and Pillon, and between Pillon and St. Laurent the 6th R.C. The 13th A.C. received an order to occupy Dombas-Merles-Viller les Mangiennes, and the 5th A.C. had to get beyond Delut-Vittarville, covering itself adequately against Montmédy.

In the evening I telegraphed to my father from Esch : "In four days of heavy and sanguinary fighting my Army has driven the enemy from one position into another. To-day the complete destruction of the French army facing us was prevented by a violent hostile offensive from south of Verdun. A large number of guns and an enormous number of prisoners have fallen into our hands. My troops have fought magnificently everywhere. The losses are very great."

On August 27 the Emperor replied from Coblenz : "My dear boy ! So the great blow at your left flank has been delivered and has failed. You have parried it splendidly ; congratulate Knobelsdorf also from me. There must be terrible scenes on your front, with all the enemy dead and destroyed batteries. Oven and his Main Reserve have also done their duty gloriously and contributed to the ultimate victory. With God's help a heavy task has been well accomplished. My warmest thanks and congratulations to you and your army. I have spoken to many King's Grenadiers, Olga Grenadiers, men of the 122nd, and so on, who have passed through here in hospital trains. They were all enthusiastic and wanted to get back to the front as soon as possible. They had fought at Virton and Longwy, had a stiff task, but bore themselves bravely."

For August 26 the comparatively minor task allotted to the Corps was inspired by the troops' absolute need of a rest and the necessity of reorganizing the formations, the ranks of which had been greatly reduced. It was of quite special importance to make good our ammunition supply, and to that

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end the Deputy Chief of Staff, with the Corps Commanders and L. of C. Authorities, simply moved heaven and earth.

Staff and orderly officers came and went, and their reports gave us a very clear picture of the situation at the front, in the Casualty Clearing Stations and on the roads, the strain on which was enormous owing to the coming and going of transport and supply columns of every kind.

The hostile behaviour of the civil population, who repeatedly fired on our troops by treachery and contrary to international law, made it necessary to set up courts in the hands of the higher judicial authorities. During house-to-house fighting in Longuyon and Audun le Roman the inhabitants were caught in the act of using sporting guns, which had been sent from Paris for the purpose. The anger of our troops at such behaviour on the part of the civil population was wholly natural. In view of such occurrences the feeling of sympathy with peaceful non-combatants, which is inherent in the German character, of course gave way to other emotions. I convinced myself, both personally and by sending special officers, that all that was humanly possible was done for the victims of the war, and I was full of admiration and gratitude for the unselfish devotion of everyone in our medical and sanitary services, who drew no distinction between friend and foe. My heart bled at the sight of all this human misery. I found it unspeakably difficult to maintain my outward composure whenever I visited a hospital.

On the other hand, as a responsible Army Commander I was fully conscious that I must not let my feelings sway my military decisions and actions more than was necessary to enable me to perform my sacred duty of weighing up the cost in human life against the military advantage to be obtained. The commander must be able to watch blood flowing, but only when he is convinced of the necessity of it. Some find this harder than others, but in the hour of calm reckoning no one is spared the tragic conflict of the heart against the reason and the will. The world suspects nothing of what goes on in the mind of the general, nor should it suspect anything. "The Commander must be an actor and wear the expression prescribed by the rôle he desires to play," said Frederick the Great. No doubt the world is apt to judge superficially and come to a wrong conclusion because it only sees the mask

## The Battle of Longwy

of the Commander's serene brows and knows nothing of what is going on behind them.

Immediately after the Longwy battles I received a command to report to His Majesty in Luxemburg. I presented myself there in the house of the German Envoy. Our meeting, after all that had happened since August 1, was a deeply moving one. The Emperor praised the handling of the 5th Army and handed me personally the Iron Cross, Classes 1 and 2! A solemn and impressive moment! With what silent reverence had I always gazed at this cross on the breasts of the old warriors of 1870-1, and now I was wearing it myself on my field-grey tunic! Subsequently I myself pinned Iron Crosses on the breasts of hosts of my brave companions in arms, and always remembered the pride with which I received the award of this historic recognition of German soldierly devotion. The Emperor sent me away with favourable news from the whole German front, both East and West.

On my return to Esch I witnessed a scene on the road which was really worthy of the artist's brush, when, with a tremendous clatter, galloping Prussian Hussars brought in six French guns, drawn by a captured team. After an excellent meal the proud and happy horsemen handed over their light and handsome "Seventy-Fives" to my Army Staff. The weapon looked like a toy, but it had already proved that in many respects it was superior to our field-gun.

On August 26 part of the 2nd Battalion of the 98th Reserve Infantry Regiment, under the command of the trusty Major Krause, was brought from Diedenhofen to Esch to act as guards. Thereafter it was retained at Army Headquarters for that purpose. The early experiences of the war led us to think that, in addition to the L. of C. zone itself, the communications of the Corps with that zone required special protection. The surrender of the Landwehr employed on those duties meant a deplorable weakening of the battle front, and at a later stage all the armies paid the penalty for it. I am sure that, at the beginning of the war, we could and should have gone much further in using the Landsturm to take over the duties of the Landwehr.

At my headquarters, August 26, which we spent quite quietly, gave us ample time to reflect on what we had just passed through, and to consider the position on both sides in the recent battles. It seemed to us that the 5th Army was bound



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to be vigorously attacked from the region of Verdun at the moment when, confined in a very small area and restricted to a few roads, it wheeled west from Diedenhofen round Longwy. It was that consideration which inspired our own plan of operations in the battle in the Longwy region on August 22, when we wanted to free our army of the shackles the enemy intended to impose upon it. Moreover, it was only in this way that we could attain and complete the investment of the enemy's barrier forts on which we had begun. Even to-day this line of reasoning seems to me so natural and simple that the purely strategical consideration—whether in view of the general situation the 5th Army should have stood on the defensive rather than attack—must inevitably give way to it. We had no right to confine ourselves to the defensive unless the country beyond Longwy lent itself to that form of operation. A glance at the map shows that this was not the case. To those critics who censure the attack of the 5th Army I would recommend a phrase of Ludendorff's which applies fitly to this case too: "But tactics ought to have had precedence over pure strategy," and in order to avoid a misunderstanding I underline the word "pure."

The subsequent development into an encounter battle was the inevitable result of the intentions of both sides. The fact that the enemy had there once more broken out of his fortified Othain line pointed to a systematic attack, inspired by the French High Command. We regarded it as part of a great offensive past Metz, conceived by General Joffre with the object of breaking through the German front during its left wheel on August 24 and 25. In this scheme the enemy reinforcements from Verdun and the region of Toul which had attacked the left flank of my army seemed to be late arrivals which were sent into action the moment they detrained. Their attack collapsed against our southern defensive flank when our last available mobile units from the fortress of Metz made their appearance at Conflans. But the enemy's onslaught on the most sensitive point had been so heavy and seemed so dangerous that the 16th A.C. and the reinforcements allotted to it, menaced in flank and rear, had to withdraw its wing from the promising Spincourt-Amel line it had already reached and retire to the Spincourt-Landres line. We regretted that decision, though we could not blame it. To-day we know



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from French sources that the enemy's thrust in our flank was carried out with four reserve divisions, and had no real weight behind it. But such knowledge after the event does not set the standard by which General von Mudra's decision is to be judged. The difficulty of my operation was the original one that I was tied to Diedenhofen-Metz. Events would have taken a very different course if Main Headquarters had relieved my army of this task at the right moment and transferred it to a part of the 6th Army, which could have been sent forward through the Metz-Diedenhofen fortress system into the Woëvre Plain immediately after the victory in Lorraine. If that had been done we should have had no further anxiety about Verdun. It is interesting to me to read in the Schlieffen literature published after the war that that man of genius wanted to have a strong wing echelon of reserve divisions attached to the 5th Army, so that the Army itself, freed from all cares about Verdun, could be used solely for the operations in the field. Fate kept me tied to Verdun for three and a half years !

I and my trusty colleagues were still reflecting long and seriously on the past when the untiring telephone recalled the present with a piece of good news. The fortress of Longwy had fallen. In the afternoon the Commandant, Lieutenant-Colonel Darche, had raised the white flag and surrendered unconditionally, with his garrison of 3,700 men. Within the fort the Upper Town of Longwy had been converted into a wild waste of ruins by days of bombardment. Only the church, the Prefecture, the market-place, with its ring of houses, still raised their charred walls to heaven. A chaos of heaped-up rubbish, bricks, beds, beams and household gear of all kinds. The nerves of the garrison in its underground shelters had been terribly tried by the eternal crashing and smashing among the battered houses above, but their shelters themselves were more or less undamaged. Judging by my personal impressions, gained on the spot, an energetic commander, with a devoted force determined to resist to the last, could have held the fort for some considerable time longer.

The Vauban Work was antiquated, but was circumscribed by a fosse 14 metres deep, and it was not yet in a condition for storming. Only one breach, and that hardly accessible, was visible in its walls, which were partly cut out of the solid

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rock. General Kämpfer, "the Fortress-Eater," was successful in attaining his object by bombardment alone, without the necessity of storming the place, a process which would presumably have involved heavy losses. The Würtembergers were the first to enter, and the Commander was taken to Esch and brought before me. He said that he was compelled to surrender because the entrances to his turrets had been totally destroyed by the bombardments, a statement which subsequently turned out to be untrue.

At that time I still believed in the chivalry of French methods of war, and therefore handed the vanquished's sword back to him and offered him a safe-conduct. He preferred to share his men's captivity. Subsequently many things were discovered in Longwy which outraged German feeling to the highest degree, e.g., the existence of dum-dum bullets. The result was that the Commander had to be deprived of his sword again.

The evacuation of all the valuable war and hospital material in the Fort of Longwy was the work of the L. of C. troops. The siege troops, with the field and foot-artillery, which had long been so sorely missed, hastened to join the Corps, which had meanwhile been victorious in the field.

## CHAPTER III

### THE FIGHTING BEYOND THE MEUSE

#### THE PURSUIT TO THE MEUSE

**P**URSUIT! how completely had this thought obsessed all minds on the Headquarters Staff ever since they had crossed the blood-stained battlefield some days previously! Pursuit across the Meuse, hard on the heels of the beaten French troops—what rewards in booty, prisoners and material awaited the victorious army, and how light-heartedly did it confront the crossing of the river, serious as this obstacle was! Thanks to the protection of their ring of forts, however, the enemy had not been driven out of Verdun, and owing to the fact that the pressure of the outflanking movement had ceased on the northern wing as well, they gained time to organize a determined resistance on the west bank of the river. The Army, which at this moment faced Verdun on the line Vittarville-Mangiennes-Spincourt-Landres, was thus obliged to sacrifice much precious time in order to press its way through between the menacing fortress and Montmédy, which was still in French hands, and make headway against the broad stretch of river. As if that were not enough! On the 26th of August the 5th A.C., which was nearest to the river, had already begun the pursuit from Vittarville through Ecurey to Harau-mont, when the order came from Main Headquarters that it was to leave my Army and march back to Diedenhofen, in order to be used for some other purpose. Everyone thought that the intention was to strengthen the northern wing of the Army, which was wheeling round, by supplying it with a reserve force, but it soon became known that East Prussia was the 5th A.C.'s ultimate destination! The war had only been in progress three weeks, and so far everything had gone brilliantly. At this point, however, the whole situation seemed

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to be in danger, owing to the fact that we had not reckoned with the start the Russians had had in their mobilization. What with the casualties we had sustained in fighting and heavy marching, the Army of the West had become alarmingly reduced, and now our strength was still further diminished by the demands of whole Army Corps for the East. As it happened, the 5th A.C. was not used after all for clearing the enemy out of German territory east of the Vistula ; but from the day it was withdrawn from the Front, its absence on the Meuse between the 4th and the 5th Armies never ceased to be regretted. The two Army Corps which were simultaneously withdrawn from the right attacking wing of the Army of the West (the Guard R.C. and the 9th A.C.) did, in fact, co-operate successfully later on in the region of Tannenberg in freeing East Prussia from the enemy ; but we paid a heavy price for their withdrawal from the Marne, which was ultimately admitted, even by General von Moltke himself, to have been a fatal mistake on the part of the Higher Command. If it was urgently necessary to send reinforcements to the East, the 5th A.C., which had already been withdrawn, and another corps taken from the southern wing of the Army ought to have been selected in the place of these two corps. Before it withdrew through Marville to Fentsch, the 5th A.C. received the special thanks of its Commander-in-Chief in the form of a highly-appreciative Army Order.

According to orders received from Main Headquarters, which was still in Coblenz, the Army was to gain the line of the Meuse on the 29th August. Air reconnaissance had shown that large enemy forces were collected on both sides of the river near Louvemont and Malancourt, and that in addition the left bank behind the destroyed bridges—that is to say, the whole of the front with which we were concerned—was occupied. Having carefully protected its present left flank, therefore, the Army wheeled past Verdun into the new front line, and the 13th A.C. marching over the battle sector vacated by the 5th A.C. through Louppy towards Saffey-Dun, the 6th R.C. in the direction of Liny-Vilosnes, and the 16th A.C. through Damvillers towards Sivry-Consenvoye. The 5th R.C. was allotted the task of forming the link between the North and West Front before Verdun, and to this end the Metz Main Reserve was placed under its orders. Hollen's Cavalry Corps,



# ADVANCE OF THE 5th ARMY ACROSS THE MEUSE, AUGUST–SEPTEMBER, 1914.



Scale 1:300000.

0 1 2 3 4 5 10 15 20 25 30 km





## The Fighting beyond the Meuse

which at first marched ahead of the 16th A.C., was to cross the Meuse as soon as possible, and then resume its strategic functions, while two brigades from the force under the Higher Landwehr Commander No. 2, with the necessary complement of Artillery and Pioneers, were entrusted with the capture of Montmédy. A so-called Beta-Mortar (30 c.m.) was given them to expedite the accomplishment of their undertaking. From the reports of the 4th Army, which was on our flank, we were able to form some idea of the difficulties that had to be met before even the valley of the Meuse was conquered. A strong counter-attack, launched by fresh French troops on this army's front against the advance forces of the 6th A.C., that had crossed the Meuse on the heels of the enemy's rear-guard, had succeeded in driving them back on Olizy with heavy losses. The 4th Army urgently requested us to advance by way of Stenay to its support ; and this is where the loss of the 5th A.C., which we had given up so reluctantly, already began to be felt. As to the 13th A.C., which was the next available force, it was still awaiting the completion of its strength in the form of the 52nd Infantry Brigade, that was only just on its way from Longwy. The Cavalry Corps was thus obliged to fill up the gap, and it was launched in the direction of Stenay. Meanwhile, in order to ensure very close tactical co-operation, Main Headquarters placed the 6th A.C. under my command, and it turned out that the G.O.C. this Corps was none other than my old and honoured military companion, General von Pritzelwitz. In the 5th Army, the 13th A.C. was to force a crossing near Saffey and further to the south, and, thrusting north-west towards Beauclair-Nouart, open the way for the Cavalry to cross near Stenay and make its way to the rear of the enemy's line facing the 6th A.C. and the 4th Army. To the left of the 13th A.C., and with the view of warding off any possible flank attack from the south, the 6th R.C., echeloned to the left, was to force a crossing over the Meuse and push on to the line Cunel-Nantillois, while the 16th A.C. was to advance to the west as far as Dannevoux-Gercourt.

Meanwhile, relying firmly on the good fortune that had hitherto attended our peerless troops, the 4th Army had concentrated on the 28th August, and repeated its attack, and this time had broken through. The opposing army, under General Langle de Cary, thus had to evacuate the bank of the Meuse

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it had so stubbornly defended. This victory of Duke Albrecht of Würtemberg's troops, however, brought no immediate relief to my army at first. The craft of the enemy and the constraints imposed by the strong French corner-stone of Verdun reduced all the fighting to a step-by-step struggle upon the stoutly defended advanced zone of the fortress.

But fortune was to smile upon us all the same. While, on the 29th of August, the Army Corps assembled upon their respective sections of the river, in order to concentrate their artillery to cover the fighting and the work of the infantry and pioneers around the points where the river was to be crossed, the Commandant at Montmédy had succumbed to the overwhelming odds against him. The flames that rose heavenwards from the neighbouring fortress of Longwy, like the flare of a gigantic torch, and the preparations that were already being made against his own eyrie, at last drove him and his garrison out to seek refuge in the mist and the darkness of the night, and as fugitives they crept through the undergrowth of the extensive forests of Montmédy and Louppy in the direction of Verdun to the south, which they hoped would prove their salvation. Suddenly, however, in the neighbourhood of Murvaux Wood, on the Louppy-Murvaux road, they came upon the Würtemberg troops. Impartial witnesses have declared that the fugitives first threw up their arms to surrender, and then, as our men peacefully approached them, fired on the latter at close range. Even the Swabian, however, could allow no quarter after that, and after a bloody fight at close quarters, in which the French were made to pay the penalty for their treachery, the survivors, numbering about 700, were taken prisoners, together with their Commandant, who, with a white flag, once more announced his capitulation. For weeks after this stragglers from the fugitive garrison were constantly discovered in their hiding-places in the woods.

At times, even in war, the most serious moments have their comic aspect. The Headquarters Staff of the Higher Landwehr, which was to launch the attack against Montmédy, was just engaged in issuing its well-thought-out orders for the assault, when suddenly an officer of some Würtemberg Uhlan regiment, covered with dust from head to foot, burst in upon them. "My good fellow, where have you sprung from in that attire?" was the somewhat unfriendly greeting he received.

## The Fighting beyond the Meuse

“As a matter of fact, I’ve just come from Montmédy.” “But that’s nonsense. We’ve got to take the place first. Do not disturb our serious work with such tomfoolery!” “I’m awfully sorry, really. But I can save you the trouble. I have actually been in Montmédy. The French have all left it.”—Long and somewhat discomfited faces among the Staff.

### THE FIGHTING FOR THE CROSSINGS OF THE MEUSE

At the headquarters of the Operations Section of the Headquarters Staff in Beauville, east of Longuyon, the reconnaissance and intelligence reports as to the situation on the far bank of the Meuse were becoming crystallized into a very clear picture indeed, and this picture revealed the fact that behind the local river defences there was General Ruffey’s army, with numerous batteries, holding a strong main position along a line which ran approximately through Villers devant Dun-Aincreville-Cunel-Nantillois-Cuisey-Béthincourt; while further masses of troops had been seen in the neighbourhood of Dombasle and Clermont. This situation and the heavy losses which the Corps Staffs reported had been incurred in fighting for the different sectors of the river that had been allotted to them indicated the need for patience, while our successes were given time to mature. Meanwhile the favourable news received from all the Armies engaged in the great left wheel seemed to justify a confident attitude toward the situation as a whole, and on the 28th August Main Headquarters fell in with the universal sense of victory by issuing instructions for a general advance to the south-west, in which the right wing of the 5th Army was to march on Châlons; but, even within the zone of the Army itself, the pressure required to open up the defiles on the Meuse was to come from the right. For that reason the 6th A.C. received, on the 30th August, the order to advance to the south. Meanwhile, however, Corps Headquarters reported that, after the fighting in the woods and at the points where the river was crossed, the condition of the troops was such that a day’s rest was imperative, and it could only march in two columns on Buzancy and Fossé on the 31st August. By the evening of the 30th the foremost units of the 13th A.C. near Dun had, by dint of steady slogging

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and without any help from their neighbours, at last succeeded in taking the west bank of the Meuse, whence they were able to make their influence felt, if only to the north in the direction of Mont devant Sassey. In Stenay the Cavalry Divisions in single file were crossing the foot bridges that had been built with so much pains.

The fact that our flank and rear were beginning to feel increasing pressure from the enemy forces defending the Meuse was shown by the reports received on the 31st August from the 3rd and 4th Armies, which had pushed on as far as the line Réthel-Attigny-Buzancy, and the 6th A.C. was therefore called upon to exert pressure on Barricourt. The Cavalry Corps, on the other hand, was to advance between the 6th A.C. and the 13th A.C. (the whole of which was crossing in the neighbourhood of Saffey-Mont), in order to clear the ground in front. Meanwhile Army Headquarters issued ever more urgent orders, even to its two southern corps, to exert all their strength to force the passage of the river; for Main Headquarters had informed us, through an intelligence officer, that a break-through might be attempted by the enemy between Metz and Verdun against the vital artery of the German armies. At the same time the 5th A.C., which had been held up at Diedenhofen, waiting to be transferred to the East, was once more placed at the disposal of the 5th Army, with the suggestion that it should be used to strengthen the forces now operating in the Woëvre Plain, and to secure their junction with the fortified Moselle Front. The real defence of this locality was in the hands of the Metz Main Reserve until such time as the proposed 8th and 10th Ersatz Divisions should arrive from Lorraine. My operations, therefore, continued to be hampered by the fetters binding me to Metz. I and my Staff certainly did not attach much importance at the moment to the possibility of the French exerting such extreme pressure along their whole front west of the Meuse as to achieve a break-through, more particularly as they seemed to be engaged, even on the front of the 6th Army, in moving troops westwards from their fortified camp of Nancy. In view of the general situation we were much more inclined to anticipate an enemy relief attack west of the Meuse, and in a northerly direction against the advancing left wing of the German Army, and that is why we wished to return the 5th A.C. to the line at that



## The Fighting beyond the Meuse

point. We hoped that in this way, with our increased strength and deep left echelon, we should be able to ward off all flank attacks from the direction of the fortress and the country west of the central Meuse forts. And this seemed all the more necessary, seeing that Main Headquarters itself had, in its orders of the 28th, already referred to, assigned the 5th Army an extraordinarily long front. Main Headquarters, however, did not accept our view, and thus the 5th A.C. took no part in the decisive actions west of the Meuse.

Very naturally I and my Staff were once more in a state of the utmost suspense, wondering what the historical 1st of September would bring to the two Southern Army Corps, the 6th R.C. and 16th A.C., which were engaged in heavy fighting for the crossings of the river at Dun and Sivry respectively. The success which was ultimately obtained, through the concentration of all our resources and the heroic example of all the officers, senior and junior, confirmed the justice of the decision we had arrived at, but only after much mental conflict. The enemy had not embarked upon any relief offensive, and under German pressure from north and east they were, according to the reports of our troops, "in retreat which was almost flight."

This expression, which had become a sort of stereotyped formula, should not, however, be understood to give any accurate description of the actual circumstances, for we were dealing with an enemy magnificently trained in the art of strategic retreat. The roads by which they retreated from their strong and well-prepared first line of defence seemed in much the same condition as those by which we had come up in our trying advance. Quantities of equipment, and even of arms of all kinds, were found in our wake also. If, however, these happened to be French, the desire to believe the enemy in "full flight" became the father of such misleading reports as were sent in by all Headquarter Staffs, my Army Headquarters not excepted. There can be no doubt that they inspired Main Headquarters with exaggerated notions about the certainty of the victory, and possibly contributed later on to the pessimistic view taken by the Chief of the General Staff when the sudden change of fortune came, and General Joffre converted his hurried flight beyond the Marne into a counter-attack against the overwrought German

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Army. Such reports seemed hardly compatible with the bitter truth, which was that our troops were always coming up against an unbroken battle front. That was our experience, even after we had known the lust of conquest in forcing the Meuse valley, in the cool meadows of which so many loyal warriors were laid to rest. The advance of the 5th Army west of the Meuse was the signal for fresh developments in the battle.

On the 1st September, amid the loud cheers of all the troops, His Majesty the Kaiser appeared at my Headquarters in Beuveille, a house belonging to some French peasants. My host's pretty niece stared wonderingly at the Emperor, and then said to me: "Is that really the Kaiser? But he does not look so very terrible; in fact, he is a very handsome man." She was evidently thinking of the caricatures of the Kaiser that had appeared in all the French papers, and was genuinely surprised. In spite of the severe damage done to their village, the community of Beuveille had not taken flight, and subsequently I took good care to make them the object of my special protection. Later on the place became known as the headquarters of Captain Rohr's Storm and Instructional battalions—that remarkable innovation in the training of troops for heavy infantry action.

After the liaison officer who had been sent to the 6th A.C. and 8th A.C. had returned, it was possible to report to His Majesty upon the further plans of the Army. The following corps had been launched in hot pursuit: the 18th through Authe-Briquenay-Grandpré to Ville sur Tourbe, the 6th through Buzancy-St. Juvin to Varennes. Hollen's Cavalry Corps was to advance from Stenay through Nouart, and, leaving the foremost units of both corps in its rear, push on via Grandpré through the Argonne. Lieutenant-General Franke's Landwehr Division, which no longer required to remain in front of Montmédy, followed via Stenay, to hold itself at the disposal of the Army. The 13th A.C. was dispatched through Banthéville to Cheppy, and the 16th through Montfaucon towards Avocourt. The 6th R.C. was, for the time being, to remain at Brioules at the disposal of the Army.

Air reconnaissance reported strong enemy forces on both sides of the Argonne, while others were said to be retreating to the south before the advancing 4th Army. It therefore

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behaved the 5th Army to block their way as much as possible by a rapid thrust forward.

The difficulties connected with the Meuse sector of the line were not due merely to the obstacle presented by the river itself, for the crossing of which eight pontoon bridges amply sufficed; for in any case in summer it can be forded in most places. They were due far more to the fact that the river is accompanied along its course by a deep canal, banked by steep walls, while a railway runs alongside, and in places it is flanked by swampy meadows. Moreover, the valley is encircled on both sides by undulating hills, which begin to rise more or less close up to the edge of the stream, and are arranged in tiers one behind the other, thus providing an ideal battleground for a defending force. The fact that General Ruffey's Army was able successfully to carry out its apparent task of covering the flank of the French Army, as it retreated to the south, is to be ascribed to the peculiar nature of the ground. Throughout much heavy fighting it kept its right wing close up to the fortified camp of Verdun, on the left bank of the Meuse, and, while fighting daily rear-guard actions, gradually turned its left back as fast as the speed of the retreat would allow, to the neighbouring corps which it was covering, on to the line Forges-Malancourt-Vauquois-Boureuilles. It follows from this that, as far as we were concerned, the fighting during the early days of September became fiercer and more exhausting the closer we drew to Verdun. Whereas the Army Corps on the right wing that were pursuing in the direction north to south were covering a lot of ground, the progress of the troops which had crossed above Stenay became slower as the difficulties increased.

It was discovered too that, owing to the strain of marching on the hard roads, the Cavalry Corps, which was crossing the Meuse at Stenay, could no longer be used effectively in the van of the Army. It was only just possible to fill the gap between the 6th A.C. and 13th A.C. by means of a regiment which was sent forward to Nouart, in addition to Jäger battalions and artillery. Relying on the authority of our cavalry leaders, we had entered the war with the belief that concentrated bodies of cavalry, with a high degree of mobility, would reconnoitre on the fronts of the armies and fight their

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way forward. But, what was more important, they were expected, particularly at a time when crops were still standing—at least, this was the story told at all cavalry manoeuvres—to live on the land, and in any event to prove no obstacle on the roads used by corps and divisions for their line of march. The experience of the war taught us, however, that the mobility of masses of modern cavalry is in the long run not greater than that of our infantry, with its splendid marching record, and that the former always halted and got in the way of the infantry the moment things in front began to look ugly. The fodder trains of the cavalry divisions were always a source of anxiety to the Deputy-Chief of Staff, the Quartermaster and the commanding officers of columns, and in order to secure these columns, without which they could not move, the cavalry constantly installed themselves in places which ought to have served as quarters for the sorely-tried infantry. Even with my cavalryman's heart, I was obliged to acknowledge more and more every day how little use my Cavalry Corps was, composed though it was of the most magnificent troops, in such country as that which lay in the neighbourhood of the Verdun front. I therefore suggested personally to Main Headquarters that I should give it up, and that it should be employed on the right wing of the Army. Unfortunately I met with a flat refusal, and then, when it was too late, realized the tragic truth that this mass of cavalry might have turned the tide if they had been used with the 1st and 2nd Armies.

South of the advanced guard of the Cavalry Corps, which had pushed forward from Stenay to Nouart, the 13th A.C. had vigorously fought its way up to the wooded heights between Montigny and Mont, whose beautiful Romanesque church crowns the height. Then the enemy gave way before the pursuing 6th A.C., and the latter, echeloned to the right, extended via Buzancy-St. Juvin to Varennes, while the 13th A.C. wheeled smartly and pressed south over Banthéville and west on Charpentry. At the same time the 6th R.C. and the 16th A.C., which had passed by the charming little town of Dun, had driven the enemy out of Brioules and Sivry and back to the line Cierges-Montfaucon.

And here I must digress a moment in order to repeat a little story that was told me one day by my splendid friend, Captain Schwantes, who was then a G.S.O. on the Staff of the 6th



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Reserve Corps, about his G.O.C. Old Gossler always kept as close as he could to the front and was generally mounted. He thought this was the proper thing to do, for that is what the G.O.C.'s did in 1870. The result was that his headquarters was frequently under heavy artillery fire; but this did not disturb him in the least. When the advanced guard of the 6th R.C. reached the Meuse near Dun, the place was just being heavily shelled. The Pioneers had built foot and temporary bridges, but so far no troops had crossed over, except one or two companies. And no doubt there were many who were of the opinion that, after all, there was no need for any terrible hurry.

Old Gossler had gone over with the first companies, and was behind the railway embankment in the front line. The situation was distinctly unpleasant; the French were keeping up a fierce fire, and at any moment a counter-attack might have driven the small handful of men back again to the east bank of the Meuse. Gossler therefore said to Schwantes: "Fetch the G.O.C. Division!" At last this officer appeared. Gossler ordered him to take the heights which lay half left. The G.O.C. Division began punctiliously to write out carefully-worded divisional orders, when the old gentleman cut him short with the drastic remark, spoken in pure Berlin dialect: "Take all that for granted! You've three battalions here. Just go and take those heights!"

And that is what actually happened. Old Gossler was a brilliant soldier, a splendid man, and quite a character. His men loved him, and I had a genuine respect for him.

### THE 3RD AND 4TH OF SEPTEMBER

In our endeavours to envelop the enemy in front of the 6th R.C. and the 16th A.C. the 13th Corps aimed at reaching the line Cheppy-Véry-Epinonville by the 3rd September, with the bulk of its divisions near Charpentry (26th I.D.) and Eclisfontaine (27th I.D.). Montfaucon, which, on its proud conical peak, overlooks the whole district, was defended with particular stubbornness, and was actually regarded by the French inhabitants of this part of the country as impregnable. When the gallant Metz Corps with wonderful bravery carried it by storm at 3 o'clock on the afternoon of September 3rd, in spite of the



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most furious counter-attacks by black troops, I drove past the transport columns and the battery positions and, amid general cheers and the waving of helmets, went right up to the fighting troops. There, amid all the din of battle and the hurtling enemy shells, I had that glorious feeling of victory which only the fighting line experiences, and from an ideal central position was able to observe the movements of my whole army. Standing in an orchard I saw to the west, on the edge of the Argonne woods, the 6th A.C. working their way forward to Varennes, while in the valley close to me, the foremost units of the Württembergers appeared. All around me on the heights of Montfaucon lay the 16th A.C., and far away to the north was the 6th Army Corps, whom I had already greeted as it pressed on towards Cierges.

In the deafening roar of the battle, and standing here among the dead, dying and wounded, I could not help being impressed by the harsh contrasts in human life which modern warfare so frequently brings to the fore even within the most limited area. Our mood of earnest exaltation inseparable from a victorious battle was suddenly broken by the sound of a piano which issued from the burning house quite close to me. "*Püppchen, du bist mein Augenstern!*"\* were the words, and I could hardly believe my ears. A young soldier, evidently with a subconscious feeling of the proximity of death, was thus giving artless vent to his love of life. How often did the long war and life in the front line prove that for those who were in the thick of it, it lost a goodly portion of its horrors! The natural man, with his irrepressible longing for sunshine and joy, was often able to treat the serious business of war half-consciously as a sort of game. The shells outside certainly meant death and destruction, but the burning roof above would surely last some while longer; so let us be merry to-day, for to-morrow we die! For countless thousands, however, even to-day was already too late. On the way a terribly mutilated soldier, lying on a stretcher, tried to greet his Crown Prince with a trembling hand and a faint cheer. How delighted he was by my sympathy and the presents I gave him, and how deeply I was impressed by the greatness of heroism and the nature of such self-sacrifice which could face even an agonizing death!

It was with genuine reluctance that I took leave of tha

\* The words of a popular German song, "Darling, you are the apple of my eye."

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imposing panorama of war of the 3rd September to be witnessed on the line Varennes-Montfaucon-Gercourt ; but I did so with the confident hope that the irresistible advance of our armies must lead to the defeat of the enemy forces. Thousands of prisoners and quantities of war material had again fallen into our hands, strong enemy forces were moving south on both sides of the Argonne, or were encamped there over a vast area. Our troops and those concerned with their welfare were pressing for a day's rest. It would have been an advantage if the whole army in the west could have an adequate opportunity for mental and physical recovery before the next battles. I was inclined to comply with the wishes of the men, and fix the 4th September as the rest day. But how were things going with the 1st and 2nd Armies on the right wing of our vast wheeling movement? Everybody on my staff was anxiously asking that question. Main Head Quarters, however, ordered the continuation of the pursuit with the object of doing the enemy as much damage as possible, and making his position more perilous by the occupation—a difficult operation—of the Forest of Argonne.

Our plans for September 4th were as follows: The 18th Reserve Corps, on the left wing of the 4th Army, was to advance through Ville sur Tourbe to Valmy; the 6th A.C. through Varennes (West)—Vienne le Château to St. Ménehould; the 13th A.C. through Varennes-Clermont to Les Islettes, and the 16th A.C. through Avocourt to Auzéville; while the Cavalry Corps was to go forward at last and carry on the pursuit both sides of the Argonne, through St. Ménehould and Clermont.

The 6th R.C., in the neighbourhood of the line of the Forges, had to protect the army's communications from any attacks that might come from the direction of Verdun, while the Landwehr, as Army Reserve, was to follow the course of the Meuse westwards from Stenay, through Montigny. East of the Meuse, the 5th R.C. in the neighbourhood of Damvillers, and the 5th A.C. and the Metz Main Reserve at and south of Spincourt were engaged in their former task of isolating the fortress and securing our communications with Metz. Fortunately, the garrison of Verdun, in spite of the fact that its communications with the country behind were in no way hampered, maintained an attitude which, compared with the possibilities open to it, can only be termed more or less passive. According to the orders

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from Main Headquarters, the 5th Army had to send the bulk of its divisions south through the Argonne and simultaneously complete the isolation of that fortress. For that purpose our intention was that the 5th A.C. should seize the Côtes Lorraines south of Verdun from the east. After the capture of the forts of the Central Meuse from Troyon to Camp des Romains near St. Mihiel, the corps was then to cross the river and join up with those forces that had taken up their position west and south-west of the fortress. The detailed reports from the troops engaged in isolating the fortress of Verdun, as to its very inadequate equipment (which was a fact at that time), made my Head Quarters Staff bitterly regret that the special material and troops required for an attack were not at its disposal. My army was and continued to be constantly hampered and weakened by the danger from Verdun. What a gigantic success it would have been could we have captured that bulwark at that time, when it would still have been a comparatively easy undertaking !

The little town of Stenay, which was our new Army Headquarters, had been lucky ; it was hardly damaged at all. When I drove into the town through its lofty old city gate I little dreamt that it was to be my fate to spend two and a half years of my life in this little place. My quarters consisted of a very beautifully situated house, surrounded by a well-kept garden, on the outskirts of the town. It belonged to a certain Madame Duverdier, who had fled, and her private chaplain, a by no means congenial individual, received us in her stead. He had had to leave the field of his former labours ; but the two more amenable spirits in the kitchen remained willingly at their old posts and soon became our very good friends. The excellent old cook " Augustine " remained in the house ; she was the sort of person to be respected, and looked after us in the most touching manner. My Headquarters Staff was installed in the fine large rooms of a school which stood on the old fortress walls of the little Meuse town, and from its windows we had a broad view of the fertile valley surrounded by wooded hills. Almost all the villages and towns in the neighbourhood of the river had been abandoned, and the houses and their belongings had for the most part been destroyed by fire and the war. I felt it incumbent upon me to help as far as possible all those who had remained behind. But those who benefited

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from our help will certainly not dare to speak about it, now that their country has been lashed into a feeling of such mad hatred against us.

On the 4th September an Intelligence Officer from Main Headquarters came to inform us that the situation both in the East and the West was favourable, and that we were advancing triumphantly everywhere. After the huge victory of the battle of Tannenberg against the Russian Narev Army, in East Prussia, towards the end of August, preparations were being made for settling accounts with Rennenkampf's forces. The ruthless and irresistible onrush of the right wing of the Army in the West, in accordance with the German plan of campaign, had been accompanied by unprecedented feats of marching and a rapid series of victories. Lieutenant-General von Kluck was driving the English before him through Compiègne, after scattering the army of d'Amade, which was concentrating on the lower Somme. This news was certainly received by us with great pleasure, but we anxiously inquired about the strength of the reserves on our right wing. We knew that there must be some heavy fighting the nearer our right wing drew to Paris, that mighty fortified camp in the heart of France. To this the messenger from Main Headquarters gave us a reassuring answer.

While all this was happening on the extreme wing, General Von Bülow's 2nd Army, at the extremity of the German right wing, had successfully crossed swords with General Lanrezac's forces on the St. Quentin-Guise line, between the Somme and the Oise. Here, on the 30th August, the French Army's brave defence, conducted offensively throughout, succumbed to the German outflanking movement, and a general retreat via Ribémont-La Fère (on the Oise), delivered on the anniversary of Sedan the bridges across the Aisne near Soissons into German hands. Further east General von Hausen's 3rd Army had also reached the Aisne, after severe fighting, and occupied Réthel. Duke Albrecht of Würtemberg's 4th Army had crossed the Aisne at Vouziers after the retreat of his opponent, Langle de Cary, from the Meuse on the 28th August, where there had once more been extremely heavy fighting in the southern outskirts of Sedan. On the whole German front west of the Meuse the enemy were thus being forced back southwards to the Marne, but



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the nearer the line drew to Verdun the more stubbornly did they cling to every feasible line of defence. There was no question of "full flight" on our sector of the front.

In contrast to the war of movement on the fronts of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Armies, the 6th and 7th Armies, under the command of the Crown Prince of Bavaria and Lieutenant-General von Heeringen respectively, were engaged in desperate position warfare. Between the strong fortified camp of Nancy and the Vosges, as also in the maze of these hills themselves, their struggle against the armies of Castelnau and Dubail still continued. I was forced to conclude from the explanation given us by the Intelligence Officer from General Headquarters, that in this period we had completely departed from Count von Schlieffen's plan of campaign, which was not unknown to me. That gifted man, our former Chief of the General Staff, had intended to keep the left wing of Germany's Western Army south of Metz much weaker from the start, in order to have all the more troops available for use on the right—the decisive wing. Even after the victory in the Lorraine battle General von Moltke had not only refused to weaken the left wing, but finally gave it the extremely difficult task of breaking through Toul-Epinal fortified line. It was hoped that the 5th Army would facilitate this task by its advance south along the western bank of the Meuse. The staff of my army were not very confident of the success of this operation. In spite of the most stubborn resistance and the fiercest counter-attacks the Meurthe line with Lunéville and St. Dié fell into the hands of the 6th and 7th Armies. Manonvillers, the strongest French fortress, which commanded the road and railway between Avricourt and Lunéville, was smashed to pieces under the fire of our heaviest artillery. From that moment, however, the offensive began to assume more and more the aspect of trench warfare. In the mountains our troops held the passes, and in the Belfort gap the line St. Amarin-Pfirt.

Behind our Western front all the fortresses and forts had been silenced, and there only remained Antwerp, with the Belgian Army cooped up within its walls, and the fortress of Maubeuge (besieged by General von Zwehl) on the Charleroi-St. Quentin railway, which still held up forces we much required.

In this strategic situation Main Headquarters decided to



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secure a decision in Germany's favour once and for all by means of a break through. Certain dangers had already become apparent on the extreme right wing. Paris threatened as a dark tower on the horizon, and one certainly not to be underestimated in the strategical position. In addition certain internal problems of army administration, the claims of the East, the capabilities of our formations (which had been greatly reduced), and the possibilities of supply of all kinds had to be considered. But unless we continued the pursuit with all possible energy, the beaten foe would soon be able to offer fresh resistance, which would have to be broken by further fighting. Such reflections led to renewed and daring action.

### THE FIGHTING ON SEPTEMBER 5, 6 & 7

Far into the night on the 4th and 5th September fighting on a considerable scale still continued on both sides of the Argonne and in the forest itself with the enemy forces which the 5th Army was driving back to the south. And this refers more particularly to the little towns of St. Ménehould and Clermont, which, to ensure the success of our task from the 5th September, were to be seized by night attacks. It was on this day that the 4th Army was expected to reach the line Vitry le François—St. Mard sur le Mont. And in accordance with this plan the 5th Army, still deployed for action at any moment, worked its way laboriously south and east in the following formation :

4th Cavalry Corps in front of the junction of both armies in the neighbourhood of St. Mard-sur-le-Mont.

6th A.C. from St. Ménehould through Villers en Argennes, as far as the line of the Aisne Charmontois-Senard.

13th A.C. from Les Islettes through Brizeaux, as far as the line Beauzée-Fleury, front towards the Meuse.

16th A.C., deployed for action, had to remain behind the Cousance sector.

6th R.C. was relieved from line of posts on the little river Forges south of Montfaucon-Gercourt by Franke's Landwehr Division, and had to isolate the forest of Hesse along the road from Parois to Avocourt.

The movement succeeded, but not without some fighting.

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Enemy rearguards were identified on and north of the line Belval-Beauzée-Souilly, and must therefore have been in touch with Verdun. The papers found on a French Staff Officer taken prisoner at Clermont indicated the presence of the main body of the enemy near Laheycourt-Villotte-Vaube-court. It belonged to two French army corps.

The need of exceedingly vigilant direction in the army's difficult position made it imperative to shorten our communications, and Army Headquarters was therefore transferred from Stenay to Varennes. Picturesquely situated on the edge of the Argonne, and high above the charming valley of the Aire, the little town of Varennes, which is known to history as the place where the unhappy King Louis XVI. was arrested, was the centre through which passed practically everything in the way of supply for the army. Night and day there passed before the house occupied by myself and my personal staff an unbroken line of thousands of vehicles of every description. It was like the circulating life fluid of a mighty artery, on whose regular flow, so close to the threatening fortress, the weal and woe of everything out yonder on the front depended. In contrast to other French quarters we had occupied, this house, which had apparently been inhabited by a young married notary, was like the public rooms in the stately house of the Préfet, tastefully decorated. But the hard work which was carried on in the public rooms of the *Préfecture*, with their beautiful wooden panelling, Gobelins, antique furniture, and a valuable library, left but little time for the contemplation of their beauties. Even the prospect from the large windows, which, reaching down to the level of the floor, gave us a magnificent panoramic view of the Argonne country, could only take my thoughts and those of my colleagues for a few short stolen moments from the serious problems the solution of which meant victory or defeat.

On the 5th September Main Headquarters had ordered "the 4th and 5th Armies to advance as quickly as possible to the south-west, in order to open the way across the upper Moselle for the 6th and 7th Armies." The Army Headquarters Staff read this as an indirect confirmation of the many reports it had received concerning the alleged extensive transfer of enemy troops by rail from East to West. This weakening of the resistance in front of the 6th Army had apparently

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strengthened Main Headquarters' hopes of a successful breakthrough in the gap between the forts of Nancy and Epinal. Such a breakthrough would be facilitated if the 5th Army, by advancing rapidly through Bar-le-Duc, attracted large enemy forces to it. In any case, a joint offensive launched by the 5th and 6th Armies would make the task of the extreme west wing easier. According to further instructions received from Main Headquarters on the 5th September, the right wing of the 4th Army had to advance through Vitry, the right wing of the 5th Army through Révigny, and the Cavalry Corps was to proceed in front of the 4th and 5th Armies to reconnoitre.

In pursuance of this plan, on the 6th September the army ordered the 6th A.C. to advance from the line Charmontois-Triaucourt through Laheycourt-Villotte, and to take the bridges across the Marne-Rhine canal, near Revigny and Neuville. As the column on the left wing of the 4th Army was marching through Sermaize-les-Bains, Hollen's Cavalry Corps from the direction of St. Mard was to open up the passage across the canal at a favourable spot, and then push forward again to the south-east. It fell to the lot of the 13th A.C., who were to advance from Triaucourt (East) and Evres, through Lisie-en-Barrois-Rembercourt, to capture the bridges near Mussey, Varney and Fains. The 16th A.C. was to advance eastwards from this point, intervene if required, and reach Bar-le-Duc; while Franke's Landwehr Division was to spread its covered position of contact before Verdun, from the Meuse to Avocourt, and the 6th Reserve Corps from Avocourt as far as St. André.

As it happened, the whole day was occupied with hard fighting against the 3rd French Army, which had meanwhile been placed under the command of General Sarraill, and, by a series of determined attacks from the east and south, forced our Army Corps to bend inwards. Instead of reaching Revigny, the 6th A.C. warded off some violent attacks from the woods round Villotte, and by evening occupied a line which ran approximately from Villers-aux-Vents to Villotte. After a hard day's fighting, the 13th A.C. reached the line Vaubecourt-Evres, without, however, being in touch with the 6th Army Corps. But General von Mudra's Corps had the worst of the fighting. It had to start fighting as far back as the Burlainville area on the Aire, in order to clear the way for its advance towards

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Bar-le-Duc. Then its 34th Infantry Division was attacked near Beuzée from the south, and its 23rd Infantry Division was attacked from the direction of Heippes-Souilly. It turned eastwards and, by dint of much severe fighting, gradually reached the line St. André-Ippécourt. The 6th R.C., which was just marching through Clermont towards Verdun to occupy the new observation sector allotted to it, aimed at hurrying forward to Ippécourt to help the 16th A.C. But meanwhile, owing to the threat of an attack from Verdun, it was forced to wheel inwards with the 11th R.D. towards the Cousance sector near Julvécourt, and with the 12th R.D. near Jubécourt. I went to see Von Gossler, the G.O.C., at his battle headquarters near Rarécourt, and under the fire of the shells which fell all about us, became fully aware of the gravity of the day's fighting. To the north, near Parois, the Landwehr Division joined up with the line in accordance with its orders, but it was quite unable to fill up the whole gap as far as the Meuse, and so the 77th Active Infantry Brigade of the 5th R.C. was forthwith fetched across from the east bank of the Meuse. Everything depended on keeping the broad front of the army well supplied with men while the fighting was at its height, and that is why it was imperative to secure the absolute safety of the only main road east of the Argonne. An order of General Joffre's, which happened to be found, gave the best possible idea of the situation: "At this moment when the battle which is to save our country is just beginning, no man must think of looking back. All our strength must be concentrated on the attacks which are to repel the enemy. Those troops that can advance no further must at all costs stand their ground and die rather than fall back. In view of the situation no weakness can be tolerated!"

This order confirmed the impression which had been formed all along our line, that in order "to save the country" the enemy had braced themselves to launch a determined and well-prepared counter-offensive along the whole of their front. At sundown on the 6th September, the 5th Army occupied approximately the line Villers aux Vents-Villotte-Vaubecourt-Beuzée-St. André-Parois-Avocourt-Forges. Thus, instead of reaching out to the south, the line ran almost due east. The enemy were installed in front of us, and quite close up, with their backs to the Meuse, and occupied strong positions amply



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supplied with artillery, which must certainly have been taken from the fortress. As they had kept in close touch with Verdun in spite of their retreat, they almost surrounded the German front, from the east, and made our field of operations an extremely pointed salient. The whole front of the German 4th Army had reached the river Ornain north of the canal; while Hollen's Cavalry had also met with the success we had hoped for, and had fought its way into its position beyond Revigny in front of the inside wing of both armies.

The plan for the 7th September was to renew our attacks upon the enemy's positions, and to meet Joffre's proposed decisive offensive by an offensive of our own. The fighting on my army's front, however, which was imposed by the general situation, could only prove thoroughly successful if the 4th Army could succeed in wheeling southwards as it had been ordered to do. Despite the most severe fighting, it prepared the way for this movement in the most promising manner, for it succeeded in pushing to Vitry-le-François and over the railway to the south, and across the canal near Pargny and Sermaize with its right wing. Meanwhile, the 5th Army was engaged practically the whole day in violent artillery duels. With the help of the 25th Reserve Division of the 18th A.C., which had been allotted to it, the 6th A.C. pushed on to the line Laymond-Louppy-Villotte, while the 25th R.D. itself pressed forward beyond Revigny to the line Mognéville-Vassin-court. The 13th A.C. gained about one kilomètre beyond the line Vaubecourt-Beauzée. Otherwise the line remained the same as on the previous day, and we dug ourselves in. Owing to the large gap between the 6th and the 13th A.C., the position was in some respects a weak one; when, therefore, reports came to the effect that large numbers of enemy troops were moving from the neighbourhood of Bar-le-Duc towards the 13th A.C., the following order was issued: "Enemy reinforcements marching up from the south-east on Bar-le-Duc and to the north. Only small forces stand in front of the 6th R.C. An attack against our right wing may be expected. The 6th R.C., together with the 12th R.D., will march through Froidos-Waly-Foucaucourt-Evres to Vaubecourt, and will come into action there and be at the disposal of the 13th A.C. Franke's Landwehr Division will have to take over and occupy the position vacated by the 12th R.D."



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Meanwhile the 13th A.C. would be able to ward off minor attacks without assistance.

In this critical moment in our preparations the thrust of the 5th A.C. on the right bank of the Meuse acquired a decisive importance.

### THE 8TH SEPTEMBER

Up to the 7th September the offensive tactics carried out by this corps through the Côtes Lorraines and southwards around Verdun, with the initial object of silencing the barrier-fort of Troyon, prospered beyond the line Vaux-Deuxnouds. As the 9th Division had to be left in the plain of Woevre to close up the east front of Verdun, we only had at our disposal for the attack against the Meuse forts the 10th Infantry Division, with a battery of heavy field howitzers and an Austrian motor-mortar battery. The headquarters of the 5th A.C. in St. Maurice was given Lieut.-General Noeldechen from my Army Headquarters Staff to assist them and to take over the direction of its artillery. In order to secure a prompt execution of his task, we telegraphed to General von Strantz, informing him that the 5th Army's front was facing east, towards the line Bar le Duc-Beauzée and to the north; and we reckoned upon his attacking the enemy's rear immediately with his army corps.

The fort of Troyon was silenced by heavy howitzer fire on the 8th September. It responded but feebly to our bombardment, and showed no further signs of life after 11 a.m. The 30 cm. Austrian mortar which was to assist the artillery already in action was expected to open fire at four in the afternoon, and it was hoped that the fort would be taken on the 8th September. Then the work of Les Peroches, on the left bank of the Meuse, was to be shelled by the heavy howitzers, and taken under fire, and the mortars to be brought from Metz were to be directed against the fort of Génicourt to the north of Troyon. Our infantry lay about 100 mètres in front of the works of Troyon Fort. With the fall of Troyon and Les Peroches the gap still existing to the south in the circular front we were forming round Verdun was only reduced by seventeen kilomètres. But the most important thing of all was that the 3rd Army's road to the French rear was now

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free. The Metz Main Reserve (the 3rd Reserve Division) had remained in the Woëvre plain, between the Côtes Lorraines and the Moselle, to guard against any danger from Toul-Nancy. It had already strengthened its position in the area between Thiaucourt and Pont-à-Mousson, and had warded off a number of violent enemy attacks.

The 6th Army, after much sanguinary fighting, was confining itself to a bombardment of the strong positions round Nancy. After their preliminary bombardment, they still hoped, with the expected steady advance of the 5th Army beyond Bar-le-Duc to the south-east and towards the rearward communications of Nancy, to be able to break through the Trouée-de-Charmes between Nancy and Epinal. And thus forces which were badly needed elsewhere remained here involved in a hopeless struggle.

It was at this time that, feeling uneasy about the general situation, which, despite all the reports of victory, struck me as being threatening, I availed myself of my faithful friend and adviser, Landrat von Maltzahn, in order to appeal directly to my father. It was not the situation of my army that made me anxious, though that was certainly critical, but rather certain reports I had heard about our right wing, which, apparently without sufficient reserves, was marching past the strong fortress of Paris. We heard of considerable bodies of enemy troops being transported from east to west, and on our side, of movements of troops from the 2nd to the 1st Army. I therefore applied direct to his Majesty for information. In a letter of the 8th September my father answered: "My dear boy! Your fears are quite unfounded," and then proceeded to expatiate upon the thoroughly hopeful aspect of things both in the West and the East. The letter ended thus: "Yesterday I wanted to go to the 2nd Army, and to visit General von Hausen on the way. Unfortunately the latter did not allow me to enter Châlons, as the place was practically empty of troops, and the streets were being shelled by long-range guns. So I remained at Suippes, and with a heavy heart listened to the battle in the distance. May the good God continue to be with you and yours as hitherto, and help us to bring about the decisive defeat and final collapse of the enemy's resistance. Your loving father, WILHELM."

How differently events might possibly have turned out

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if, on the 7th September, the Operations Staff of Main Headquarters had accompanied the Highest War Lord on his journey to the 3rd Army, and then on to the 2nd Army ! Then, instead of sending Lieut.-Col. Hentsch out as their representative and semi-plenipotentiary, they would themselves have been present at the Headquarters Staff of the 2nd Army in Montmart Castle at the decisive moment of the battle.

On the evening of the 7th September the 4th Army reported that, in spite of the determined defensive battle they had fought that day against the enemy offensive on the Ornain sector, they were going to continue their own attack with their right wing in the direction of Vassincourt. I accordingly issued orders to the effect that the Joffre offensive should be opposed by the strongest possible counter-attack towards the south-east, so as to assist, as far as possible, the frantic and decisive fight that was raging all along our army's front. And I appended the following army order : " By means of its incessant fighting carried on ever since the 22nd August, with wonderful endurance and gallantry, my army has achieved the greatest victories. It is due to the courage and loyalty unto death on the part of all ranks in the army, that our beloved Fatherland has hitherto been spared the ravages of the war. Now the enemy is resolved to put up a last desperate fight to obtain a decision. We are all aware that only by the most energetic and persevering efforts shall we be able to achieve the final victory."

On the evening of the 8th September I visited the Corps Headquarters of the 16th Army Corps in Fleury, and then I proceeded to the 6th Reserve Corps at Rarécourt, in order once more to obtain a first-hand impression of the condition of affairs at the front. Both corps had certainly suffered heavy losses, but each of them was still filled with a spirit of confidence and determination. I therefore telegraphed to my Imperial father : " Incessant heavy fighting for the last few days, but gradual progress is being made. The troops are behaving brilliantly. Yesterday at close quarters I observed the great artillery duel in the region of Autrécourt-Lavoye. Hearty congratulations on the fall of Maubeuge."

On the afternoon of the 8th September, with feelings of tense excitement, we received the visit of Lieut.-Colonel Hentsch, the Intelligence Officer from General Headquarters,

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who informed the Headquarters Staff concerning the general state of affairs. He was to go from the 5th Army to the 1st Army, in order to return to General Headquarters with a clear impression of the situation as a whole. As he visited my Headquarters first, he was able to give us only such information about the condition of things in the other armies as was already known to General Headquarters in Luxemburg, or at least, as much as they wished us to know.

Since the 5th September, the 1st Army had, west of the Ourcq, warded off a heavy enemy attack by troops launched against it from Paris, and intended, after a readjustment of the forces on its own front, to attack the enemy itself, because it felt strong enough to deal with the situation. In any case, there was a large gap between the 1st and 2nd Armies.

The 2nd Army had maintained its position on the Petit Morin sector between Montmirail and St. Gond against superior enemy forces, and owing to difficult conditions prevailing on its left wing, a part of the neighbouring 3rd Army had been brought into action there.

The 4th Army was slowly gaining ground south of the Rhine-Marne canal between Vitry-le-François and Revigny, and on its right wing it was joined up with the remaining portion of the 3rd Army.

We discussed the state of the 5th Army. It was holding absolutely firmly to its line, and was at present engaged in attacking the Fort of Troyon with its 5th Army Corps.

With the object of forming a new army for the west wing, two army corps had without mishap of any kind been withdrawn from the 6th and 7th Armies, together with the 7th Reserve Division, and these troops were at that moment being transported to Belgium.

Thus from the account received from Lieut.-Colonel Hentsch, the general situation seemed to be quite satisfactory, particularly as the difficulties in the 1st and 2nd Armies seemed to have been solved.

Nevertheless, on my Operations Staff, we could not conceal from ourselves that the rapid victorious march of the German Army seemed suddenly to have come to a standstill. We saw the confirmation of all the confused rumours and the justification of the inferences drawn from the reports as to the transfer of enemy troops, in the fact that the French



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Commander-in-Chief was after all placing superior forces at the right time, and at the decisive point, with a view to launching a methodical counter-attack. We also realized that the firm formation that had characterized the accomplishment of the closely ordered advance of the German Army at the beginning had become loosened by our tactical and isolated engagements, and that this was more particularly alarming in so far as it affected the extreme right wing of the 1st and 2nd Armies.

As to my own and the 4th Armies, it seemed most unlikely, in view of the hard fighting of the last few days, that the rapid advance to the south-east desired by Main Headquarters could possibly be achieved in the near future.

Moreover it was no good trying to forget the serious losses we had suffered, more particularly as they consisted of our best troops, and had not yet been made good. The supervision and control of the long lines of communication, together with the enemy positions which had still to be taken, demanded enormous numbers of men. In addition the enemy had at their command all the railways and shorter communications, not to mention the other resources of their home country.

To show the extremely far-reaching measures which seemed to my Headquarters Staff to be already warranted by these conditions, the following order issued to the 5th Reserve Corps may be of interest: "The extent of the losses incurred on the front before the enemy has made it necessary to march all available portions of the corps that can be spared on the west bank of the Meuse to Clermont. The G.O.C. 10th R.D. has to that end handed over five battalions, one squadron of cavalry, and three batteries. The 5th R.C. must nevertheless fulfil its task of guarding the lines of communication. Serious engagements are not at all likely to occur in the neighbourhood of Verdun during the next few days, as the French will have sent all their available troops south-west to their positions where they expect to obtain the final decision."

### THE 9TH AND 10TH SEPTEMBER

After all possible care had been taken to ensure a firm resistance along all those sectors of our line which were threatened by the Joffre offensive, there was nothing else to



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be done on the 9th September but to abide by the orders issued to the various Corps Headquarters. Early in the morning at Evres, at the 13th Army Corps Headquarters, whose worthy G.O.C., von Fabeck, owing to his strictness and severity, was jestingly nicknamed the "Southern Cross" by the Württembergers, I found the troops, despite all the losses they had suffered from hostile shelling, burning with desire to get to grips with the enemy again. They wanted to storm his heavy batteries and tear them away from him, as the positions we held could hardly be maintained for long under their fire. Ever more and more heartily did I learn to appreciate these brilliant, vigorous and reliable Swabian troops, who always fought superbly, even in the most difficult positions, and who punctually fulfilled every task that was allotted to them. After the Corps Commanders, who had been summoned to Triaucourt at 2 p.m. to meet their Army Commander, had duly made their reports, orders were issued to the 13th A.C. and 16th A.C. (the former to include the 12th R.D.) to make a night attack on the 10th September at 3.30 a.m., so that advantage might be taken of the darkness and the early morning mist to storm and take the heights commanded by the enemy, without being too much hampered by hostile artillery fire. After the Corps Commanders had come to a careful agreement concerning the apportionment, among the two corps and their divisions, of the sector on which the attack was to be launched, and the various objectives involved, the next step was to storm the heights along the approximate line Génicourt-Erize la Petite-Issencourt-Heippes-Souilly. The 6th A.C., with the 25th R.D. added to its strength, was to undertake the protection of the right flank by co-operating in the action, and the 4th Army was also begged to support the attack on its own front. All other portions of the army retained their old functions, and General Headquarters was informed of the intended night attack.

On the afternoon of the 9th September, rumours suddenly became current again as to the unsatisfactory situation of the 1st and 2nd Armies ; but neither their origin nor their accuracy could be ascertained. Strong French and English forces were said to have delivered flank attacks on the inner wings of both armies, and forced the 2nd Army to retreat, a movement to which the right wing of the 3rd Army beyond Châlons was

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obliged to confirm. Moreover, it was said that in accordance with direct instructions from Main Headquarters, the 5th Army Corps had been obliged to stop its attack on the Troyon fortress, in order to arrest an expected break through between Verdun and Metz of strong forces which were reported to be concentrated east of St. Mihiel. As a matter of fact, Main Headquarters then actually informed us that the 5th A.C. and the Metz Main Reserve had received direct orders to effect a junction with the 5th R.C. and the fortress of Metz, and at once to construct and occupy defence works in the Woëvre plain. A portion of the 6th Army was transferred to Metz and placed under the orders of that fortress and the 5th A.C. of the 5th Army. Thus the absurdly feeble offensive against the strong Meuse forts and its co-operative effect on the impending night attack had fallen through. In response to our inquiry, Main Headquarters replied at 7.30 p.m. that in view of the general situation, the railway line through Diedenhofen and Metz would be closed for three days to all 5th Army supplies. This meant that the 5th Army's supply of ammunition would for the moment be suspended, and therefore that the intended night attack would, owing to the munitions it would inevitably consume, have to be dropped. The army was to hold its positions on the 10th September, but was to send all the wagon-lines and material that could be spared to the rear, so that in the event of its becoming necessary for it to withdraw, its roads would be free. As the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Armies had retired behind the Marne, and only the 5th Army maintained its position, the intended attack would in itself have been most opportune, but, owing to the state of the ammunition supply, it was unfortunately impossible.

The general situation, though by no means bad, "required carefully watching."

The more mysterious the reports became, and the more contradictory appeared the rumours coming from irresponsible telephone calls and the lines of communication, the more opposed our military instincts became towards any thought of calling a halt to our offensive, which promised so well. Nevertheless, this dread alternative had in a trice entered the realm of possibility. The hint from General Headquarters, however, that a retreat might be necessary came like a bolt

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from the blue, and the Operations Staff now saw clearly how dangerous the situation of the army might become between the Argonne and Verdun. As matters stood, the night attack, and an absolutely successful one at that, seemed to be only too well indicated. It was essential that our army, which was fighting so close up to the enemy, should drive the latter back to a respectful distance, if only to secure the necessary room and freedom of action in case a retreat movement became necessary. And we were the more inclined to abide by our scheme of attack, seeing that it was now technically impossible, and therefore fatal, to attempt to countermand the orders already issued, which had covered the smallest details. A report to this effect was communicated to Main Headquarters, and once more they were urgently requested to signify their approval. Meanwhile, as we expected to have a night of exciting and decisive fighting, we retired early to bed for a few hours' rest. When, however, Main Headquarters' consent did not seem to be forthcoming, my Chief of Staff came to me, and asked me to consider the alternatives. The night attack had either to be given up, as Main Headquarters had directed, or else it had to be launched on our own responsibility, and in spite of everything. I abided by the conclusion I had formed after a very careful examination of all the circumstances, and decided that not a word of the orders already issued should be altered, and I need hardly say that in this decision I was entirely at one with my Army Commander.

General Headquarters had also not been able to turn a deaf ear to the urgent appeal of the army; and when they ultimately signified their approval, they sent the following order to the 4th Army: "3rd Army remains south of Châlons ready to renew the offensive. 5th Army attacks in the night of the 9th-10th September. If there is any prospect of success, the 4th Army will also attack, and to this end must enter into communication with the 3rd Army." Thus the idea of an offensive had prevailed once more.

During the night and early morning of the 9th-10th September there was wild activity in the office of my General Staff. At 3 a.m. the 4th Army let us know that they were going to attack at dawn. At the start the fight conducted by the 13th A.C. and 16th A.C. and the 12th R.D. against the enemy, who had been taken by surprise, surged indecisively up and down the

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line. But the reports received from the corps commanders and their subordinates revealed the accustomed confidence of previous battles. They showed an iron will and promised victory! At 5.50 a.m. the 33rd Division was fighting round Heippes and the 34th Division round Serancourt. At 6.20 a.m. 13th Corps Headquarters were already in Sommaisne, and its troops were fighting for Hill 309, the most important height west of Erize-la-Petite. By dint of heroic and gallant attacks the divisions drove the enemy at the point of the bayonet out of the front line, seized a quantity of booty, prisoners and guns, and by mid-day, after having hardly halted to take breath, reached their appointed objectives. The 6th A.C., with the 25th R.D., as also the 18th R.C. of the 4th Army, who were protecting the right flank, were also engaged in a severe fight, but they were able to hold their ground along the whole of their line. One of the most important achievements was the warding off of the enemy attacks by the splendid 21st R.D. of the 18th R.C., south of the canal near Revigny. At this point in front of the junction of the 4th and 5th Armies, things would have gone badly for the latter if the enemy had succeeded in breaking through. The 21st R.D., which was not only flanked on both sides, but also magnificently supported by Hollen's Cavalry Corps, who had dismounted for the fight, succeeded with unparalleled bravery, under the command of General von Scheverin, in repulsing six successive enemy assaults on the line Contrisson-Neuville-sur-Orne. The inflexible will and unflinching steadiness shown in this hard battle have earned unfading glory both for the men and the officers who took part in it.

Ever since its misfortune at Pillon at the beginning of the war the Cavalry Corps had, owing to the lack of opportunity for its powers in the neighbourhood of the fortress of Verdun and between two fronts, which had been constantly at close grips with the enemy, led an unsatisfactory existence. But on this occasion, on the canal near Revigny, in conjunction with the 21st Reserve Division, which was to distinguish itself often again in the future, it had had its great day.



## CHAPTER IV

### RETREAT. TRENCH WARFARE BEGINS

#### THE SITUATION OF THE 5TH ARMY ON SEPTEMBER 10TH

ON the morning of September 10th Lieut.-Colonel Hentsch returned to Varennes from his tour round the headquarters of the armies, and informed us about the general situation, which, according to his view, had become unsatisfactory. The armies would have to break away from the enemy by retreating behind the Marne! The right wing of the 2nd Army, which "was all to bits," had been thrown back, and strong enemy forces had driven a wedge between the 1st and 2nd Armies. The 1st and 3rd Armies were also retreating, and the 4th had joined the movement. He had the verbal authority to give the armies the order to retreat. When, in accordance with this authority, he tried to urge me to withdraw the 5th Army to a line which ran approximately from St. Ménehould to Clermont and to the north, I sent him sharply about his business. I could not bear to approach my troops, who at the cost of so much blood had fought their way to their present position a long way south of the Argonne and almost to the rear of Verdun, and face them with the appalling demand that they should now withdraw, simply to meet the individual views of an emissary from General Headquarters. We felt that we ourselves and the armies on our flanks were too victorious and too much masters of the situation, not to avail ourselves of our position to draw from it every possible advantage for the good of the whole, and for the welfare of our own army, its wounded, its sick, and its munitions and supply depots. I therefore insisted on being given a definite order which would not leave these conditions out of account, and which, in view of its far-reaching results, could only come from the Highest



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War Lord or the Chief of his General Staff. My Chief of Staff and I felt justified in opposing our own judgment to that of Lieutenant-Colonel Hentsch, who, after all, did not hold adequate authority, until such time as he had, on the strength of his evidence, obtained a decision from Main Headquarters, the only competent tribunal.

Of course, the Headquarters Staff of my army were perfectly well aware that unprecedented demands had been made upon the capacity and energy of the troops; that their strength was no longer more than half what it had been at the opening of hostilities, and that owing to the constantly increasing lines of communication, the supply of reinforcements, munitions and other needs suffered corresponding delay. The armies were, so to speak, running away from their own toils; so much so, indeed, that at 1.15 p.m. on the 10th September my Army Headquarters had to beg General Headquarters to hurry up reinforcements. All these difficulties naturally pointed to the necessity of very soon calling a halt, or, if it were a matter of relieving the situation as a whole, of ordering greater concentration upon a shorter line somewhere to the rear. But the question was, whether at this precise moment it would not have been better to extract the last gasp from every man and horse in the army and fight the great battle to a finish, and only seek rest and recuperation when once the enemy had been beaten.

But, truth to tell, at the very moment when Hentsch hurriedly took his leave of the 5th Army, the Marne disaster was already in process of accomplishment. As I have dealt with the matter elsewhere, I must refuse to discuss here events which in the Army Headquarters of the 2nd Army led to the decision, ill-founded as we now know it to have been, to retreat, and which ultimately led to the retirement of the 1st and of the right wing of the 3rd Armies. I shall confine myself to a short description of the manner in which my neighbour on the right—the 4th Army—and my own army were affected by the change in the general situation.

The left wing of the 3rd Army (19th A.C.) was joined up to the 4th Army west of Vitry-le-François. This army had fought its way triumphantly to Sermaize, and was already on the southern bank of the Marne, achieving the most promising successes from the standpoint of its projected wheel inwards in

## Retreat. Trench Warfare begins

conjunction with the 5th Army to the south-west, when the order to retreat annihilated all our hopes.

The situation of my own army, with its right fighting wing reaching from Vassincourt in a south-easterly direction to Heippes, and ready to dash towards Bar-le-Duc the moment the 4th Army had wheeled sufficiently far to the south, was no less favourable than it had always been. Portions of the 18th Army Corps, with the Hollen Cavalry Corps, the 6th, 13th and 16th Army Corps, were incurring heavy losses, it is true, in their fight against Sarraill, but they were successful. The left wing, in the region of Heippes-Souilly, firmly repulsed all the attacks from the region of the fortress. The gravest fears must have seized upon Main Headquarters—at least, so we thought at Army Headquarters—for them to have thought of abandoning the chase, when the tangible object of it lay so close to hand. Truth to tell, the confident and joyously triumphant spirit of the 4th and 5th Armies seem once more to have roused the dying resolve to alter the general situation by means of a continuation of the offensive on the inner wing. In any case, General Headquarters ordered the abandoned attack of the 5th A.C. against the Meuse forts to be resumed more energetically than before, and commanded the 1st Bavarian Army Corps, that was on its way to Metz, to be placed under the orders of General von Strantz, the G.O.C. 5th Army Corps, and to go into action in the Woëvre Plain. In the afternoon the 5th Army reported that by means of a night attack and subsequent heavy fighting, it had with the 6th, 13th and 16th A.C. and the 12th R.D., driven the enemy out of the line Louppy-Rembercourt-Courelles-Regnancourt-Souilly. It held the conquered line, and owing to the need of rest and reinforcements, was now awaiting for the success of the 5th A.C. on the Meuse heights.

Towards evening on that fatal 10th September, Main Headquarters opened its orders with the words: "His Majesty commands." But behind the external formalities that were thus restored, Fate pursued her relentless way, and on the morning of the 9th in Montmart, the headquarters of the 2nd Army had begun its retreat. The 2nd Army was to retreat on Rheims behind the Vesle, with its left wing on Thuizy, and the 1st Army was to use its own judgment in effecting a junction with the 2nd Army behind the Vesle and the Aisne.

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The 3rd and 4th Armies, on the other hand, were to go behind the Marne to a line extending approximately through Mourmelon le Petit-Francheville-Revigny, north of the canal. The 5th Army was to hold its present position. The 5th A.C. and the Main Reserve were to remain in the line Troyon-Camp-des-Romains for their attack on the Meuse forts. The 6th Army, reduced in strength, was to prevent an enemy advance between Metz and Strasburg. Portions of the 6th and 7th Armies were to be transported in the direction of St. Quentin, in the first place to meet an enemy attack directed against the right flank of the army, and then, after being reinforced, to resume the offensive in conjunction with the whole of the Army of the West. As at the time of the original advance, so now in the retreat to the proposed new front, the 5th Army was allotted the task of acting as the pivot of the army. Everything depended upon its endurance, bravery and steadfastness, for the enemy might still use their remaining fighting strength in order to effect a double outflanking movement against it from the direction of Vitry-le-François and Verdun. But, as a matter of fact, things were not really as bad as all that. The retreat had taken the French utterly by surprise. Only by slow degrees did they become aware of the change so favourable to themselves that had occurred in the general situation.

### THE 11TH SEPTEMBER

At 1 a.m. on the 11th September the 4th Army reported that in pursuance of orders given to the army, it was going to retreat on the line Francheville-Revigny, north of the Rhine-Marne canal. Despite the depressing experiences of the previous day, however, and in view of the immense success of the night attack, which was becoming more and more obvious, an excellent spirit prevailed in my Army Headquarters. On the 16th A.C.'s front Mondrecourt and Heippes had been evacuated, and large enemy columns were retreating to the south-west from Courouvre, and with the cessation of the enemy's artillery fire, which hitherto had proved so deadly, the troops began to breathe more freely. It was plain that General Sarrail's great offensive, which had aimed at outflanking my east wing, had utterly failed, as the result of our surprise counter-attack, while the troops engaged in effecting a break-

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through on the line of the Meuse forts, with the object of completing the line to Verdun, were greatly strengthened through the formation of an army detachment under von Strantz, the G.O.C. 5th A.C. He united all the troops in the area between the Meuse and the Moselle under his own command, but remained under the orders of my Army Headquarters, an arrangement which was calculated to ensure greater unity of action in the operations round Verdun.

Our hearts were once more beginning to fill with bright military hopes, when on the morning of the 11th September, the Chief of the General Staff of the Army in the Field paid a surprise visit to our Headquarters at Varennes. General von Moltke had obviously gone to pieces under the weight of his great responsibilities, and all who saw him were deeply affected. Was this the man who had to direct the fate of the German Army? In an incoherent way he tried to explain all the circumstances that had led to the altered programme. In darkly pessimistic tones he spoke of the right wing of the Army as beaten, and thought that it was even a matter of doubt when they would be able to make a stand. Moreover, it was absolutely necessary for the army itself to be pulled together and to get some rest, after all the superhuman efforts it had made, and the alarming confusion among the formations, so that it might be capable of effective action once more. Apart from the alleged unsatisfactoriness of the strategic and tactical situation, he appeared to be greatly oppressed by the question of munitions supply: all avoidable consumption of munitions was to be strictly forbidden.

When on these grounds, and contrary to the instructions received the day before, he required us of the 5th Army also to shift our line back immediately, a stormy and painful discussion ensued between General von Moltke and myself, at this our first and last official encounter during the war. The fact that in the face of the actual retreat of the four armies of the German right wing, the 5th Army could not stand alone, did not of course escape me. I was, however, strongly opposed to any hasty action, which might magnify the disaster, and owing to the difficulties of the situation of my army, and with a firm belief in my troops, I begged to be allowed a large amount of freedom in the choice of the precise moment for the beginning the retreat. I insisted on turning to account the favourable



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situation created by the previous day's successful night attack—the "*attaque brutale*"—in order to effect an orderly evacuation of the columns and trains, the whole of the sick and wounded, the munition depots, dressing stations and field ambulances. I did not want to be dictated to by the enemy, whom my army had persistently beaten during the last few days, but wished to make all the preparations for the difficult undertaking in my own way, in my own time, and on my own responsibility. The few rough roads at my disposal, running through the impassable Argonne, and alongside of it, would have to be filled night and day with the regularity of clockwork by an unbroken chain of wagons and marching columns. In order to do this, we needed time for quiet and extremely accurate work. I was fully confident that my Staff would be able to deal with the situation. And as a matter of fact, it justified my confidence by performing its duties with the technical brilliance of a General Staff. True, it hurt me to be obliged to offer such determined opposition to a man like General von Moltke, for whom I had such profound respect, who was inspired by the noblest motives, and who was, moreover, my superior officer. But I had no other alternative. As a soldier and a leader, I had to stand up absolutely for what I felt I owed the brave Army with which I had been entrusted. The Chief of the General Staff then left Varennes for the west, to continue his journey of inspection.

In the afternoon he sent Lieut.-Colonel von Dommes to me with the following order: "Reliable news of a strong enemy push against the left wing of the 2nd and against the 3rd Army makes the withdrawal of the east wing imperative. His Majesty commands: the 4th Army to go back to the line Suippes (inclusive)—St. Ménehould—(not inclusive), and the 5th Army to join up with it on a line St. Ménehould (inclusive) and eastward."

At the same time Lieut.-Colonel von Dommes was authorized to arrange with my Army Headquarters about the exact line of resistance which was gradually to be reached by the 5th Army. He proposed the southern edge of the Argonne, or the line St. Ménehould-Clermont. But from the standpoint of our army we could not agree to this.

For the choice of the new line of resistance it was all important to bear in mind that, owing to the enormous access



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in morale which the enemy would be sure to experience as the result of what had happened, he would feel bound to make every endeavour to exploit his victory by an immediate attack. In view of this possibility we must create the very best possible fighting conditions. This led us to select a less advanced position, along the elevated line Apremont-Montfaucon-Gercourt, which was naturally stronger; and our reasons for the choice were as follows\*: "At the present moment, when the 6th and 7th Armies have had no success, the enemy need have no fear about sending forces to the north. Besides the 5th Corps is too weak for the offensive against the barrier forts. The enemy is quite free to break through the fortified area of Verdun with heavy forces east or west of the Meuse, and to push north, or to attack in a westerly direction from Verdun. Now as ever, the 5th Army forms the pivot of the whole Army of the West. Should the enemy succeed in breaking through, the plight of the Army of the West—more or less cut off from its communications across the Meuse—would be a desperate one. It is therefore necessary to reassemble the whole of the 5th Reserve Corps on the right bank of the Meuse. With the front extended 65 or at least 48 kilomètres, however, chiefly in the area protected by the fortress of Verdun, it would be impossible as proposed, with the other four corps, to hold the southern border of the Argonne, or, with the southern wing, the line St. Ménehould-Clermont; and this quite apart from the difficulties of communicating with the rear which would arise in the western portions of this country.

"And what increases the difficulty of this solution of the problem, is first, the fact that the fighting strength of the infantry in these corps amounts to only 10,000 men (in the 18th R.C. 16,000), and secondly the lack of artillery munitions in the near future.

"The responsibility for the Army of the West, resting as it does upon the 5th Army, compels it to make a very cautious choice. And that is why it is also inexpedient to hold the line Boureuilles-Vauquois, because this country lies east of the Forest of Hesse, with which the enemy in Verdun is intimately acquainted, and is also flanked on the west by the Argonne forest."

This reasoning, based upon an appreciation of the strategic

\* Extract from the War Diary of the 5th Army Staff.

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importance of the fortress of Verdun, certainly met with the complete approval of General Headquarters, but it led to great difficulties when the choice of the line of resistance for the armies west of the Argonne was concerned. The 4th Army tried to join up its left wing with the right wing of my army, which according to our decision was to stand near Apremont, and, contrary to our wishes, to some extent on the line near Binarville. It did not favour our suggestion that it should secure the great Argonne road coming from the south over Les Islettes, somewhere near Four de Paris, or at least near Vienne-le-Château. In this case the front of the army west of the Argonne, instead of occupying the unfavourable line Souain-Binarville, could have run along the more elevated and therefore more favourable line, Suippes Minaucourt-Malmy, which was more to the south.

When looking back I try to place myself in the position of my Cousin Albrecht of Würtemberg, I can easily understand that he was not willing, at our suggestion, to make his front so very much further south than the 5th Army. For it could not be denied that in this way his unsupported left wing ran the danger of being outflanked through the Argonne. Maybe my army, by bending forward into the Boureuilles area, could have prevented this. But against this was the fact that it would have necessitated an extension of our line, which, with the 5th Army badly weakened as it was, was undesirable. When I bear in mind how much more effectively the enemy might have exploited the freedom of movement which we had, alas ! given him, particularly with the strategic advantage of the fortress of Verdun, in order to operate in any direction he chose, I cannot help concluding, even at this late hour, that the 4th and 5th Armies could not have acted otherwise than they did. My conduct has been blamed and held responsible for the surrender of the Argonne Forest. Such criticism is cheap, and is based upon a knowledge (after the event) of the measures actually taken by the enemy, who seem never to have been completely conscious of the advantages of their position. Military criticism should, in my opinion, avoid this attitude.

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### RETREAT OF THE 5TH ARMY ON THE 12TH AND 13TH SEPTEMBER

My army order of the 11th September, which was issued at 8 p.m., began with the words: "In pursuance of orders received from General Headquarters, I must very reluctantly withdraw the army, in order to be able to continue the fight on a line in keeping with the general situation. The retreat along the whole front is being carried out voluntarily and is not the outcome of a defeat!" We had the satisfaction of knowing that General Headquarters had, by addressing a special order to the 4th Army, taken into account the difficulties of the 5th Army's withdrawal, and our work of saving all the sick and wounded, and all the supplies. The 4th Army was to retreat with its right wing distributed in depths, and the corps on its left wing (the 18th Reserve Corps) under my orders during the time of the retreat. In this way my Army Headquarters gained the necessary time to convey to the Corps Headquarters, the staffs, and the troops, the bitter truth about the altered state of affairs, in homœopathic doses, and without too much hurry. On the 11th September we still occupied the old positions and we still joined up with the left wing of the 4th Army. The orders issued with such a heavy heart from Varennes controlled the movements of the retreat, which were exceedingly difficult. The right wing was to go over Moiremont north of St. Ménehould, the left wing over Gercourt. The bulk of the army was obliged to pass through the narrow passage of Varennes, and was constantly threatened from Verdun. Between the troops marching back west of the Argonne, and those actually crossing the Argonne, mutual assistance in the matter of fighting was hardly possible. But, as I have already said, the French fortunately neither used the postern-gate of their fortress nor did they press on our front. Apparently they had had enough of the bloody game, and after the fright of our night-attack, dug themselves in again at a respectful distance north of Bar-le-Duc. How deeply they were affected by our attack may be gathered from a little book entitled "*Sous Verdun*," written by a French officer during the campaign. The writer describes how delighted the whole world yonder had been by Joffre's order that the French Army was to attack and not to retreat one step further.

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Then, however, the "damned Army of the Crown Prince" had inflicted the heavy defeat of the 10th September upon them, after which they had been forced to fall back again, Heaven knows how far! Our night-attack which we went to such pains to launch had therefore achieved its object splendidly.

Had we had an energetic and victorious opponent in front of us the retreat of the 5th Army might easily have been a catastrophe. The report from Strantz's Army Detachment, which arrived during the night of the 12th September, to the effect that the 5th Army Corps was still attacking the Meuse forts, as heretofore, needed a reply which would include directions concerning the new operations to be undertaken between the Meuse and the Moselle, now that the situation had completely changed. It was a matter of further barricading the east front of Verdun against enemy attacks. But all forces which were not absolutely required for this object were to be held in readiness to prevent an enemy break-through between Verdun and Metz. While the 1st Bavarian Army Corps, now being detrained, would form an effective offensive flank for this purpose, in the region north-west of Metz, General von Strantz's remaining forces were, in case of necessity, to retreat towards the Orne, and put up a frontal resistance there. In view of the retreat of the army to the line Apremont-Gercourt, the enemy obtained so much freedom of movement that the further assault of the Meuse forts was impossible for the moment, and had to be postponed to a later date.

On the evening of the 12th September, the Deputy Chief of Staff, General von Bieberstein, was able to report that the removal of the wounded had practically been accomplished. Nevertheless, the seriousness of the crisis for the whole army, and the spectacle of that endless chain of retreating ammunition columns and trains, marching through the Headquarters of Varennes, depressed us deeply. It rained in torrents! A furious storm had risen during the pitch-dark night, and vehicle after vehicle filled with muffled-up figures creaked and rumbled along the slippery streets, while the wailing and moaning of the wounded, who were being transported, could often be heard above the uproar. Night and day all the officers belonging to the Headquarters Staff were distributed for miles around, to guide and direct the moving procession at difficult



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corners and cross roads. With my escort I was able personally to lend a helping hand. For days in succession we were on the road with the Corps Headquarters and the Divisions, and always returned home with our cars full of wounded. At night we would stand in the narrow streets of Varennes in order to help disentangle the utterly inextricable maze of vehicles, on the movement of which the fate of so many thousands depended; and wherever we could we offered some comforts for the drivers, who were wet through, shivering and dead tired. Hard by the wooden bridge across the Aire in the town, a burning house threatened the thoroughfare which was so important for the safety of our lives. The bridge was saved by the presence of mind of our splendid pioneers, who worked under my own eyes with wonderful speed. The gallop of the loaded ammunition wagons across the burning ruins remains indelibly stamped on the memory of all those who witnessed it. A few houses off Catholic sisters were sitting all huddled together and motionless in a small room. For three whole days and more they had neither slept nor taken any food, but had done nothing except dress and nurse the wounded the whole of the time. When I sent them a basket of provisions from my own kitchen, their first thought was to take it to their wounded, always their wounded! Tears of deep emotion were all the thanks that could be given by one, who, at the sight of such proofs of self-sacrifice and devotion to duty, felt his own belief in Germany's future fortified and confirmed. Certainly that sight brightened the darkness of that night of rain for me in Varennes!

On the 13th September also the march continued without any interruption from the quarter of the enemy. Before Army Headquarters were withdrawn to Stenay I drove south once more through Clermont to the 16th Army Corps. Whenever I happened to stop in the neighbourhood of troops that were resting, they would surround me, and show much excitement and emotion about the retreat, which was quite incomprehensible to them. I could only comfort them with the assurance that the Army of the West was drawing back to a shorter front line after its big successes, merely in order to make good the heavy losses, to allow reinforcements to come up, and to recover its strength generally. Then the enemy's account would be settled, and we should pay him what we owed him.



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But even as I spoke the words they seemed to stick in my throat.

### REFLECTIONS

Only careful research of the history of the war can illumine the darkness that still shrouds the inner meaning of all these events. Although we certainly see a good many things very clearly to-day, at that time, of course, we only had imperfect notions of the state of affairs. Our thoughts always revolved around the army, the home-land, the happenings of yesterday, the fleeting present with all its pressing tasks, and the dark future. The manner in which the impetuous advance of the German phalanx had, to the breathless astonishment of the world outside, achieved the collapse of the enemy's army and fortresses, had enhanced the enthusiasm and the certainty of victory both at the front and at home to an extraordinary degree. But this only made the disappointment all the greater when gradually it became known that, in spite of our gigantic successes, any one of which, both in the number of the combatants engaged, and the area covered by the battle, far surpassed the most decisive engagements of the Franco-German War of 1870-71, the turning point of the war had occurred at the Battle of the Marne.

The armies which had exploited their victories by recklessly pursuing the enemy, had, according to approved German principles, acted more or less independently. Indeed, from their standpoint it was merely their bounden duty to allow the retreating foe no time to recover breath, or to organize united and concentrated resistance. This Will to Victory, which was peculiar to the German method of training the army leaders, and which animated the spirit of all the armies without exception, required, however, on the other side, the counter-weight of a correspondingly strong and united Higher Command, which, with a complete grasp of the situation as a whole, could direct the mighty chess tournament at every moment of time, by effecting decisive strokes on the one hand, and on the other opportune pauses for the concentration and massing of the troops among the various formations. How strongly and repeatedly had Count Schlieffen emphasized the principle that millions of men ought to be manœuvred like a "*bataillon carré!*" But in 1914 General Headquarters

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absolutely failed to hold the leading-strings. It was in the effort to secure good internal communications, and good means of communication with their neighbours, that the armies first became sadly aware of the childish incompetence and inefficiency which gradually characterized the work and organization of the Signal Corps, and they had to fall back on motor cars, wireless telegraphy and mounted messengers, all of which are inferior as means of communication to the telegraph and telephone. Owing to the fact that after the 30th August, General Headquarters was in Luxemburg, the 5th Army was near enough to keep tolerably well in touch with the Higher Command, despite the fact that it had to fall back on these inferior means of communication. But this was not so with the armies on the extreme and most decisive west wing, and the method adopted to overcome the difficulty, which was the despatch from General Headquarters of authorized Officers of the General Staff, and the occasional subordination of one Army to the tactical orders of the others, could not compensate the absence of personal guidance on the part of the Commander-in-Chief.

[It was the tragic fate of our nation at the Battle of the Marne, that, in spite of the unparalleled feats of arms performed by its fighting forces, the responsible personality at the head of the army lacked the divine spark, the sacred fire of genuine generalship.] I know how remote this view is from all the recent and accepted criticism which has been levelled at General Headquarters, faced as it was by the huge demands of a war on two fronts. [But after mature reflection and a careful weighing of all the points, the fact seems to me indisputable, that the Chief of the General Staff of the Army in the Field was not equal to his task.] He may not have been lacking in military insight, and in a sense of the practicable, but he certainly wanted self-confidence, strength of character and will power.]

Although in his Army Order of the 5th September General von Moltke regarded our intention to force back the French Army to the south-east against the Swiss frontier as a failure, and spoke of the German right flank as being threatened, he remained in Luxemburg, far away from the seat of all these events. It is certainly hard to understand his reasons for this. It seems to me that his deliberate reserve and self-effacement

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provide the best proof of his unconscious acknowledgment of his inability to master the situation. In any case, the news which used to reach my Army Headquarters from the cross-communications of the armies gave a better picture of the general situation than could be obtained at Luxemburg. If in my Headquarters we often wished that our conversations with General Headquarters could have been carried on with less inconvenience and irregularity, how much more must these disadvantages have been felt on our wheeling wing, where the fierce fluctuating struggle for victory or defeat, which the Army of the West was to bring to a decisive end, was above all in need of the direct, comprehensive and steady direction of the Higher Command. When on the 11th September General von Moltke finally resolved to intervene in person, it was already too late to avert the catastrophe. Nevertheless, even then a good deal might have been put straight again and readjusted. But instead of this the first retreat on the right wing only led to fresh disasters all along the front. And the nervous break-down which General von Moltke suffered at this juncture only succeeded in demonstrating beyond a doubt his unfitness for the post of Commander-in-Chief that had been given to him.

The outcome of the battle was all the more grave because it meant that Von Schlieffen's plan of campaign had gone by the board. It is true that the strategical form in which the Higher Command tried to carry out this magnificent plan in the year 1914 was from the first so conspicuously half-hearted that it was hardly just to identify it with the name of its inventor. To-day I am still of the opinion that, in view of the obvious strategical errors of the enemy, it would most certainly have been possible for us, despite the modifications of Schlieffen's plan which were adopted in our original deployment,—aye, and even after the battle in Lorraine—to have conducted the operations to a successful issue, if only we had kept constantly and steadily in mind the need of strengthening and maintaining the strength of the right wing. And that is exactly what we did not do.

But now something else occurred which told seriously to our disadvantage. Ever since, in times of peace, we had been obliged to reckon with the probability of England's fighting on the side of Russia and France in the next war,

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the conduct of the war at sea had acquired enormous importance for determining the issue of the conflict. Count Schlieffen's solution of the problem of a war on several fronts only met the case, provided that the employment of overwhelming forces and means of warfare against our western enemies on the land were accompanied by a conduct of the war at sea which would aim at obtaining a decision by offensive tactics. And, to the best of my knowledge, this idea had been adopted in the strategical plans of the Admiralty Staff, in complete agreement with the General Staff, until the very eve of war, when, for the sake of holding our high fleet back at the beginning, it was modified. I knew how proud our fleet was of its gunnery, and I was also aware of the superb efficiency of its various units, its distinctly aggressive spirit and its longing to accomplish great feats, and I was therefore bitterly disappointed that it should have been anxiously held back from the start, passively sparing its equipment, instead of going out to have a scrap with the Mistress of the Seas. To-day there can no longer be any doubt that, after all, it was due to the incomprehensible political views and reasoning of the Imperial Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg, concerning England's attitude, that paralysed the energy of our conduct of the war at sea far beyond the period which the Admiralty Staff had originally intended to hold the fleet back. England must not be provoked! Incidentally, this war was nothing more or less than a matter of victory or destruction for the German people, and none of Germany's opponents aimed more resolutely at her destruction than England did. The Chief of the Admiralty Staff was too weak to make his more enlightened views prevail in the War Councils of the Empire, and Tirpitz, the man for the job, was intentionally withheld from the conduct of affairs, and shelved. Thus the first six weeks of war, in addition to having demonstrated the inadequateness of the Higher Command, a fact which the catastrophe of the Marne had disclosed, also provided a fresh proof of a second tragic fact, which was that, in the hour of its Fate, the German people lacked a statesman gifted with a clear and realistic vision, who would have been able to grasp the meaning of this fight for our existence, and would resolutely have faced all its consequences.



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### THE BALANCE RESTORED ON THE WESTERN FRONT

General von Falkenhayn, the new Chief of the General Staff, who in the midst of the Marne disaster had grasped the reins with a firm hand, had for the moment only one thing to do, and that was to place the dislocated strategical position upon a sounder basis. The fact that, at the start, he abided by the idea of continuing the endeavour to obtain a decision on the Western front, was, in my opinion, only natural. For not only were the operations still in full swing, but the mobility of the two sides was also so great, and the general situation on the German side so insecure, that a prompt cessation of the offensive on the West, in favour of a transference of the decisive conflict to the Eastern front, was, for the present, out of the question. Any such design would most certainly have spelt defeat for us in France. As to the strategical form in which the decision was again to be sought, it was, of course, possible to hold different opinions. It has been suggested by some military critics, that it would have been best to effect an eccentric withdrawal of the German Army, so that by breaking away from the enemy many strong groups might have been formed, with the right wing somewhere near Amiens. After which, this school of critics proceeds to argue, the offensive could have been opened afresh by the outflanking of the enemy's left wing. I am not sure whether this idea is not largely the creation of armchair strategy. He who was acquainted with the spirit of the army after the Battle of the Marne, will agree with me when I say that it would have had a very serious and critical effect upon the morale of the troops if they had been asked, unbeaten as they still were, to yield up to the enemy, without any show of a fight, a further large slice of the territory they had bought so dearly. While on the other hand, the access in morale already experienced by our enemy would thus have acquired fresh stimulation, with Heaven knows what results. At the 5th Army Headquarters, in any case, we had the distinct feeling that the retreat ought to be stopped as soon as possible, and everything done to reopen the offensive. We therefore joyfully hailed General Headquarters' resolve, which was entirely in keeping with this idea. As to the question whether, by employing the 1st Army, and the reinforcements



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now available for the right wing, in a different manner, it would have been possible from the first to give the race which was now starting towards the sea-coast a more favourable direction for the Germans along the Lower Somme, I shall not express any opinion. The withdrawal movement, effected at a moment when the situation was completely in hand, was carried out under the cheering impression made upon us by the news of General von Hindenburg's magnificent victory over the Russian Niemen Army under Rennenkampf. Here, with the 8th Army, there were leaders at work who, permeated with Schlieffen's spirit, had carried out his Cannae strategy unflinchingly. The Battle of Tannenberg had filled the teacher of the German General Staff with pride and satisfaction. And the decision to give battle in the Masurian Lakes showed a similar power of will. The enemy, however, by not holding their ground stole our chance of another Tannenberg. We had a right to be proud of such feats performed by German leaders and their troops! But then a new offensive awaited them in the area of the 9th Army in South Poland, in support of our faltering Austrian allies on the San river, and also with the object of protecting Upper Silesia, so important to our war supplies. On the staff of the Commander-in-Chief of the East there ruled the iron nerves of a strong leader, whose will to victory was not to be hampered by the croaking of smaller men. Here there prevailed the spirit of the Great King, who, in the war game of forces, staked everything on the decisive card, even at the cost of running short elsewhere, and who reckoned with reverses into the bargain. And that is why the bearer of our Siegfried sword triumphed in the East. He really witnessed the marks of a disorderly flight which an annihilated army leaves behind it.

Meanwhile, in the West, the scales also soon recovered their balance. The hopes the French held of the military collapse of Germany, as the result of the retreat along the whole of the West front, had come to naught. The exceptional successes that all our armies had had against the attacking enemy forces soon enabled us to recover our confident spirits. On the left wing of the 4th Army the army corps which had fallen back into the area commanded by that army, had beaten back the enemy assaults near Binarville. Before the front of our 5th Army there appeared behind the rearguard of the 16th Army

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Corps, north of Varennes, as well as further east towards Malancourt and Béthincourt, strong enemy reconnoitring parties belonging to General Sarrail's Army. The towns, villages and wooded country on our new front lay under very ineffective shell fire. On the other hand, with the shortage of ammunition, our batteries husbanded the quota of shell allotted to them so sparingly, till the time when they would require them for administering a heavy blow to the enemy. We were burning with the desire to restore the fallen respect of the enemy for German arms by a successful offensive.

At the same time, General Headquarters, for strategical reasons, pressed us to carry out counter-attacks in order to keep the forces of the enemy concentrated at certain points, and to prevent their being transferred against the free west German wing. It was hoped that by a powerful attack from this wing, the French front would be made to yield somewhere and that we should once more be able to hold the initiative.

Opposite my army was the dangerous postern-gate of Verdun which had remained the unshaken corner-stone of the enemy's front during the Battle of the Marne. It was impossible to make this stronghold fall by means of an attack on a large scale, because the 5th Army unfortunately lacked a special supplementary besieging army. It was, therefore, necessary to find strategical means and ways of limiting the importance of the fortress, and, if possible, to force it out of the enemy's front. This could only be effected by a resumption of the offensive on both banks of the Meuse, which, at the same time, seemed to promise a more satisfactory junction with the 4th Army, and also to relieve the pressure on the latter. An offensive was therefore planned for the 22nd September, which was to open up the narrow passage of Varennes, with the further object of establishing better communications with the neighbouring army along the road from Varennes to Le Four de Paris, through the Argonne. The first thing to be done was to take the line Boureuilles-Vauquois-Avocourt-Béthincourt-Forges, in the valley of the river of the same name. At the same time it was important to encircle Verdun more firmly to the north and east. And it was while fighting with this object that the 5th Reserve Corps, so magnificently led, effected a surprise southward push on the north front east of the Meuse, by which it won from six to seven kilomètres. This

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gain, however, caused it to extend its thinly, though skilfully-occupied, line over the broad stretch of country from Consenvoye to Etain. The advance against the Meuse heights south of the fortress proved very much more difficult. After their unhappy experiences during the 5th Army Corps' push through the Woëvre plain against the Fort of Troyon, the French were now occupying the Côtes Lorraines with large forces. And that is why reinforcements were gradually brought over from von Strantz's Army Detachment. These reinforcements consisted of the two corps that had become free in Lorraine—the 3rd Bavarian and the 16th Army Corps, the Bavarian Cavalry Division and some heavy artillery. At the cost of much fighting and heavy losses these forces gradually pushed their line of the 20th September forward again towards and up the Côtes, and, linked up to the left wing of the 5th Reserve Corps, near Etain, stood in the Woëvre plain as far as the neighbourhood of Combres, with the 33rd Reserve Division and a Landwehr detachment from Metz. Joining up with them, the 9th Infantry Division took the heights near Combres-St. Remy. Close by, the 10th Infantry Division in resuming their former work against the Fortress of Troyon, pushed up the heights of the Meuse as far as Vaux-Lamorville. To their left the 3rd Bavarian Army Corps, with their foremost line, reached the extensive woodland to the north and north-east of St. Mihiel, and as far as Varnéville-Loupemont-Xivrey. The 16th Army Corps undertook to cover the front facing Toul, on the line Seicheprey-Flirey-Lironville-Mamey. The further task of the Army Detachment consisted in the taking of the Meuse fortresses (Fort Troyon, the battery of Les Paroches and Fort Camp des Romains).

On the 20th September, with the object of seriously reviewing the altered situation with him, I visited my Imperial father in Luxemburg, and availing myself of the opportunity to greet General von Falkenhayn, who had taken the place of the old Chief of the General Staff, now retired owing to sickness, I was most agreeably impressed by his youthful freshness and confidence. What a difference to Moltke!

The enemy whom we were to attack in the push planned for the 22nd September, through Varennes, was showing great activity and was strongly occupying all the important points. They had placed heavy guns near Vauquois in the Argonne,

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and in the Avocourt woods. In an ill-considered infantry push against the right wing of the 6th Reserve Corps on the 20th September, south of Cuisy, they lost five hundred prisoners. Our attack soon developed into a severe battle when at 5 a.m. on the 22nd we crossed our front line with assault detachments. The 13th Army Corps had gone through Varennes to Boureuilles, and the 16th Army Corps through Cheppy to Vauquois, while the 6th Reserve Corps and Franke's Landwehr Division were to join in the advance through the Forest of Monfaucon. As early as 6.30 a.m. the enemy's front line trenches were surprised and passed. And yet how different was the fighting now from what it had been in the first phase of open warfare! The enemy had completely changed. At its battle Headquarters in Romagne-sous-Monfaucon the Army Headquarters realized from the reports what difficulties our brave troops encountered in struggling forward against the French, who fought so magnificently and stubbornly for the smallest places. In order to reach the barricaded villages of Montblainville, Véry and the edge of the forest as far as Malancourt, the most severe fighting occurred. The enemy artillery in the woods and near Varennes, Vauquois, Malancourt, Esnes, and Cumières swept our roads of approach, as well as the valleys of the Aire and the Buanthe, which stretch beyond Varennes and Cheppy to the north. But had our troops also changed? The general impression derived from the various reports and observations we received compelled us to conclude that the aggressive spirit of the troops had been reduced in the first place owing to the enervating effects of the very bad weather we had just had, and secondly by the dysentery which had just broken out, by the slippery state of the ground, and the impenetrable underwood of the forest. What must also have depressed their spirits was the fact that we were fighting for country which, for reasons quite incomprehensible to the troops, had been surrendered only a few days previously. The whole energy of the Higher Command was required in order to organize the isolated attacks so as to make them help one another in promoting the forward movement. Owing to the enormous casualties among the Company, Platoon, and Group Commanders (lance-corporals) which had now been made good, it was our business to get these new men used to fire, and recover the old brisk swing in the advance of our infantry,



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under the protection of their own guns. By evening we had only just reached the heights immediately north of Varennes and Cheppy, as also the wooded ravine which stretches towards Malancourt. But no later than the following day I was able to convince myself that in spite of all the spirit of my men was the same as ever.

On the 23rd September the Württemberg Corps in pursuance of its strategical duties worked its way round Varennes to the west and through the forest. The 34th Infantry Division stormed Cheppy, and further to the east a stubborn fight was raging among the woods which had been made impassable by the felling of tree trunks. But under the influence of fine warm weather and the encouraging news of the success of the 4th Army and of Strantz's Army Detachment, the faint-hearted spirit of the 22nd September completely vanished. On the other hand, the combined efforts of our arms suffered from the distressing constraints imposed by the lack of artillery ammunition. Again and again the infantry ascribed their heavy losses to the lack of support they received from their sister arm, although the retreating movements of the enemy pointed to the fact that this support was quite effective. On the 24th September the news, which was immediately spread all through the army, of the heroic sinking by submarine 9 of three English cruisers off the Hook of Holland restored our high spirits all along the front. The 13th and 16th Army Corps crowned the success of their determined fight round Varennes by a series of victorious engagements carried on all through the forest, the culminating points of which were, for the 27th Infantry Division near Boureuilles, and the 33rd Infantry Division near Vauquois. Further to the west, the fighting of the 6th Reserve Corps and Franke's Landwehr Division, which was under its orders, presented equally favourable results. With its confidence in victory restored, the army had once more proved its well-tryed efficiency, and acquired unusual glory. The final reports from Corps Headquarters showed that the first objectives on the line Boureuilles-Vauquois and the edge of the forest, and to the north Avocourt-Malancourt-Béthincourt-Forges had been reached. Thanks to his overwhelming superiority in guns and ammunition, together with the skill peculiar to the French superior command, the enemy had got over their trouble very well.



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I witnessed this fight from the battle headquarters of the 13th Army Corps just north of Varennes, and was able to get a magnificent view of the whole business at close quarters. Very shortly after the second and successful storming of Varennes by the Württemberg troops I drove into the battered little town in my car, and was immediately surrounded by a joyous throng of Grenadiers who were singing their beautiful folk-song "Preisend mit viel schönen Reden" above the roar of the battle. The house which I had occupied before the retreat had been terribly damaged by a direct hit from a shell.

The daring attack made at the same time by Strantz's Army Detachment against the Meuse Forts and through the Côtes, in the middle of the area threatened on the right and left by the Fortresses of Verdun and Toul, likewise developed into a hard and painful struggle. By the evening of the 22nd September the enemy batteries at the Fort of Troyon and at Les Paroches had already been silenced, and on the 23rd September the brave troops of the 3rd Bavarian Army Corps advanced against the Camp des Romains and Liouville Forts and took them under the devastating fire of their German 21 cm. and their Austrian 30 cm. mortars. It was important for us to get a footing on the left bank of the Meuse. The railway communication between Toul and Verdun in the valley of the river had, indeed, been broken north of St. Mihiel by the courageous navigation and demolition detachments of the Pioneers; but the proposed surprise passage of considerable bodies of troops was prevented by the large forces which, under General Sarraill's able leadership, had been opportunely concentrated on the left bank, and also by the river Meuse itself, which, owing to rain and the condition of the tides, had risen high above its banks. The French very soon saw the extreme danger of the German undertaking, and launched furious relief attacks from the direction of Toul against General von Watter's 16th Army Corps which, on its front between the Meuse and the Moselle, which was directed south for the protection of the flank and rear of their comrades on the Côtes, had to make a very difficult stand. It was impossible in the face of this two-fold pressure for the weak German forces to get the better of the French defenders of the Meuse behind their strong sector. But on the 24th September, by dint of heroic

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slogging, the 3rd Bavarian Army Corps, under General von Gebsattel, certainly succeeded in unexpectedly pushing a bridge-head over the river Talenge, in the neighbourhood of the charmingly situated little garrison town of St. Mihiel. Far up above its head the German shells hammered on the hollow spaces of the Camp des Romains, which towers high above the hilly country of French Lorraine, and made a small breach in the lofty moat walls round the fort. On the 25th September the von der Tann Regiment of the Bavarian 6th Infantry Division, under the command of the brave Brigadier General von Kirschbaum, and supported by assault detachments of the Prussian Pioneer Battalion No. 16, took the fort by storm. The neighbour fort of Liouville, which lies to the east, with its adjoining battery concealed in the forest, defied our shelling. The enemy front from Toul to Verdun remained just as impregnable to our attacks as the upper valley of the Aire, south of the narrow defile of Varennes. Here the enemy had only gone back to a position from which they were still able to cover the railway line Verdun-Clermont-St. Ménehould-Châlons, so important for the transport of their troops and war material. At the time of the retreat we had relinquished that line to them with such heavy hearts.

Nevertheless, the simultaneous push through Varennes and St. Mihiel had the lasting effect of keeping large French forces perpetually on the Verdun and Toul front. His Majesty, in replying to the report of the victorious conclusion of these attacks, said: "I have received your report concerning the successful fighting near Varennes, and the occupation of that town, and congratulate you and your brave army on the occasion of this fresh triumph.—WILHELM."

### GRADUAL TRANSITION TO TRENCH WARFARE

General von Falkenhayn, the new Chief of the General Staff, visited me at my headquarters on the 25th September, and emphasized the necessity, which had resulted from the situation as a whole, of continuing the system of generally grappling with the enemy wherever possible, in order to relieve the pressure on the free western wing of the German Army,

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and also to gain time for completing the formation of the new supplementary corps at home.

The struggle to obtain the strategical initiative, however, could, owing to our inadequate forces and munitions, only be carried on for the present by means of the tactical assistance of local and limited offensives. The concentration of the troops for this purpose resulted in a stiffening of the front in all those parts which had been deprived of life and strength, and also in the need of supporting these parts with every possible technical appliance.

And thus necessity compelled us to adopt trench warfare, so heartily detested by all ; and, in spite of large local offensives and offensives on a grander scale, this was the warfare that characterized our army's unspeakably hard fight until the end. The transition followed a natural course ; at first it was gradual and proceeded step by step—quicker in theory than in practice. The possibility of having to launch an attack at places specially selected along the front depended upon the degree to which the long drawn-out lines could be safely held. That is why our method of defence gradually developed from the digging of easy and primitive field fortifications, to the construction of a well-built and deeply-sunk system of trenches. A continuous line of trenches not unlike the work of a gigantic mole was the beginning of this phase, and by the gradual addition of such lines, one behind the other, together with approach trenches, the whole spread into a series of fortifications. It was hoped by this means to achieve a great deployment of forces, and thus to reduce casualties.

Meanwhile it took some time before these new principles of defence, which were recognized comparatively soon by the Higher Command, became part of the flesh and blood of the troops. In practice they clung for a very long while to the traditional habit of building one defensive line in a manner usually quite inadequate, and it was only with hesitation and reluctance that they resorted to the system of building multiple lines, and the construction of extensive and deep trenches of all kinds, obstacles, etc. They manifested similar reluctance later on in the war towards mobile warfare and so-called elastic tactics. The underlying cause of this dull-wittedness in becoming adapted to new forms of tactics must have lain in the very thorough and somewhat one-sided peace methods of

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training, in which defence, as a method of warfare utterly foreign to the German spirit, was treated in a somewhat step-motherly fashion.

While, therefore, the guard and fatigue duties of all our armies, securely installed in their system of trenches, became no more than a question of settling the countersign for the day, the matter of carrying out local engagements with the view of keeping the enemy forces concentrated on the line continued to occupy our attention. In the 5th Army the 13th Army Corps was, on the 26th September, pushed forward through the northern Argonne, to the line Moncheutin-Binarville, and at the same time the sectors belonging to other formations were so much extended, that the 16th Army Corps was also rendered available for attacking purposes. Our intention was to attack with the 16th Reserve Corps, the 11th Infantry Division and the 13th Army Corps west of the forest, on both sides of the Aisne, against the general line Berzieux-Vienne-le-Château. At the same time the 16th Army Corps, in close co-operation with the 27th Infantry Division, fighting on the western outskirts of the Argonne, was pushed forward from the Boureuilles district, and advanced through La Chalade to Moiremont. And von Strantz's Army Detachment, which, after handing over the 16th Army Corps, had gradually been brought up to strength by means of three supplementary divisions, began to make preparations for the continuation of its relief attack through St. Mihiel. Meanwhile, in the Battle Headquarters of the 5th Army at Autry on the Aisne, we waited in vain for the successful conclusion of the action which was being carried out at this same time by the outer wing of the army. In the course of severe and stubborn fighting in the forest, the 27th Infantry Division and the 16th Army Corps, who had to bear the brunt of the engagements in the Argonne, performed the most wonderful feats against the enemy, who were up to every trick in the defence of wooded country. For the French, both in the Argonne and on the line of forts along the middle course of the Meuse, had clearly recognized the danger that threatened the maintenance of their communications with Verdun.

The fighting of my brave Argonne divisions around the enemy's principal defence works and strong points in the thick of the forest suffered from the inadequate support of our



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artillery, the fire of which it was quite impossible to observe. We were able to ascertain that the enemy was bringing up extraordinarily strong forces, so that in the ultimate capture of the strong points at La Bagatelle and St. Hubert, through the partial use of sap-attacks, a fresh proof might be seen of the high moral power of our infantry.

We began to feel the renunciation inseparable from position warfare, when, in October, the 5th Army was once more confined to an attitude of pure defence, and at the same time very much reduced in strength. We were obliged to hand over the Corps Headquarters of the Württemberg Army Corps, together with its 20th Infantry Division and the 25th Reserve Division, into the bargain. And I have pleasure in repeating here the thanks I then expressed to these magnificent army corps, as also my very warm appreciation of their unparalleled bravery and faithfulness to duty. There remained to the army, west of the Argonne, the 18th Reserve Corps with its 21st Reserve Division, and the 11th Infantry Division handed over by the 6th Army Corps. The Argonne fighting had to be continued, if only out of moral considerations; but for the time being the Corps Headquarters and von Strantz's Army Detachment were ordered to make good their shortage of men and munitions by building stronger defence works.

In the midst of inspecting positions and hospitals, a ray of light came to illumine these anxious days of autumn. Antwerp had fallen on the 9th October after only ten days' siege—an important event from the strategical as well as the political point of view! The besieging troops, which were now free, and four of the new young men's corps, which had just been formed at home, moved towards Flanders, in order to become the new 4th Army under Duke Albrecht of Württemberg. At last troops appeared to be available for the capture of the Belgian Channel ports of Ostend and Zeebrügge, which could be used as strongholds for threatening and preventing English naval traffic. On the 17th October the 4th Army itself began to advance on the Yser sector. Our object now was to out-flank the enemy's wing, or at least to secure a safe footing for the extremity of our right wing on the sea coast. The 6th Army was to support the attack, and marched on Béthune and to the north.



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### FIRST PLANS FOR AN ATTACK ON VERDUN

The unexpected success of our heavy artillery against the forts and outer works of Antwerp, which, as in Liège, collapsed like a pack of cards, made us wonder whether the hated fortress of Verdun could not be made to fall in a similar fashion. And General Headquarters even sent a G.S.O., that intelligent and magnificent gunner Major Bauer, who was concerned in the construction of the 42 cm. mortar, to my Army Headquarters to discuss the matter provisionally with us. The assaults on the forts of Liège, Namur, Maubeuge and Antwerp, which had been so prompt in their effect, opened up new vistas in this kind of warfare, and thus, even on our sector, work was begun in the building of standard-gauge and field-railways, indispensable for the transport of ammunition and the installation of the heaviest batteries. On the 8th October, from the heights of Crépion and of the Côte d'Horgne, I observed the first bombardment of the Douaumont fortress with heavy mortars. General Headquarters and my Army Headquarters were naturally concerned, in the first place, in determining the actual strength of the enemy's constructions, a question on which the war material to be used, particularly the amount of ammunition and the number of batteries, depended. The plans with the defence works of the fortress drawn in were completed by the help of aeroplane photographs, and information supplied by the troops. According to approximate estimate, however, the ammunition required for an attack lasting ten days, and launched by only two and a half army corps, with their war-complements of artillery, would fill forty-eight and a half ammunition trains. In addition to this, the needs of the heavy batteries taking part also had to be reckoned. In view of the fatal shortage of ammunition throughout the whole of the army, and, moreover, the heavy demand of troops for the intended fighting in Flanders and the East, our work at Army Headquarters was from the first carried on under the depressing doubt whether it would ever be possible to obtain the forces and the war material that constituted the bare minimum with which the attack could be undertaken. The 5th Reserve Corps east of the Meuse, between the river and the edge of the Côtes-Lorraines, were

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to be strengthened by the addition of one or two infantry divisions. The 6th Reserve Corps west of the Meuse could not reckon upon receiving any reinforcements.

Army Headquarters contemplated launching simultaneous small attacks on both banks of the Meuse, and to this end the Corps Headquarters of the 5th and 6th Reserve Corps produced accurate estimates of the forces and war material they thought they would require to carry out the scheme of attack on their respective sectors.

The 5th Reserve Corps showed that it would require at least an increase of 274 guns for flat trajectory and high-angle fire, together with an ample supply of ammunition for both. The Pioneer formations would have to be strengthened by three Pioneer regiments and six companies with siege trains, and three heavy and four light searchlight trains. In the matter of communication troops, three airship detachments, one aviation unit and one corps telephone detachment would be necessary.

According to the scheme proposed by the 6th Reserve Corps, even for the conduct of the attack on the west bank, a large amount of artillery, including some of the heaviest calibre, quantities of ammunition, and the addition of fresh troops would be required.

When, on the 19th October, the official orders had arrived from General Headquarters for the attack on Verdun, as also for the allotment of foot-artillery and pioneer formations, the Army Headquarters immediately presented its counter-demands for a daily supply of  $9\frac{1}{2}$  train-loads of ammunition for the 5th Army, and  $4\frac{1}{2}$  train-loads of ammunition for von Strantz's Army Detachment. The latter was necessary because, simultaneously with the attack on Verdun, the fighting in the whole of the region round the fortress would have to be resumed. The request for the provision of Pioneers was accounted for by the fact that Army Headquarters held the view that in spite of the effective results of our heavy artillery, the enemy would probably put up a stubborn defence by sectors. The enemy positions, which were sure to be extensive, strong, and bravely held, and the difficulties of the ground and of the wooded country, made it necessary to employ a greater force of Pioneers than General Headquarters allowed. While we proceeded with the work of distributing the available forces of all kinds among

## Retreat. Trench Warfare begins

the Army Corps, and of making the necessary technical preparations, for the transport and storing of ammunition, as also for the approach march of the heaviest batteries, it became more and more evident that General Headquarters was quite unable to help us with the full requisite strength for the difficult first stages of the action. They argued that the ammunition for the Field and Heavy Artillery, particularly of the Army in the Field, could not be placed at our disposal in the quantities we had demanded; moreover, that if it were impossible to compute our precise requirements for the destruction of the foremost and principal enemy positions, a prolonged bombardment of these positions was, in any case, out of the question. With regard to the economy imposed in the use of all ammunition for modern guns, however, they allotted us old 9 cm. and heavy 12 cm. guns, and 15 cm. guns with chase rings, with and without gun crews. In view of the indispensability of Pioneers in all the armies, and the fact that the 5th Army was better supplied with these troops than the army that had attacked Antwerp, our request for more Pioneers was refused. The Chief of the General Staff considered that Verdun would only require the same brief methods as had been adopted in the capture of Maubeuge and the Belgian fortresses.

We at Army Headquarters were also optimistic, although perhaps less so than we had been in August, when, with the armament of the fortress still very inadequate, a sort of surprise attack launched by a besieging army of second-line troops equipped with heavy guns might have had a success.

Now, however, in the period of position warfare, powers of resistance of the fortress had been systematically and greatly increased. This pointed to the need of simultaneously holding and destroying the enemy forces by frontal and enfilading fire, by the bombardment of the permanent works, the checking of sorties, the silencing of batteries disturbing our attack, and preparing the enemy's infantry positions for assault by our own artillery fire. To cover the concentration of our heavy artillery, we thought it would be sufficient to increase the support of the troops in their old positions. On the other hand, we had to reckon with the fact that long-range fire from the enemy's heavy guns, and also from the additional artillery which the enemy would place in their forward positions, would make itself felt against the intended

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main fighting position of our siege artillery on the line Hill 304 north of Esnes-Dead Man-the Forest of Cumières-Samogneux-Ormes. This meant that our infantry would have to be supported from the start by outflanking fire from field and heavy artillery. The fire of the long range heavy guns in the rear, and the fire of the heavy and field batteries, which would have to follow immediately, with the view of relieving the infantry, would mean a great deal of ammunition, while the defences of the artillery protective line, the masking and concealing of them behind high ridges and other features of the ground, the digging of them in deeply, so as to protect them from shrapnel fire, and the dummy works for the deception of air observation—all made the assistance of large Pioneer detachments absolutely necessary.

All this lack of human and technical war-supplies, of reserves and ammunition, could not in our opinion be made good by the great moral effect of the entirely novel and ear-splitting uproar of our bombardment, and the deleterious effect upon the enemy's breathing caused by the gases developed by our heaviest shells; for, in the first place, the number of such batteries was limited, and secondly, as regards the effect of the other artillery, we were obliged to reckon with the technically perfect construction of this pattern fortress. If its garrison held out, its works would be capable of defence for a long while. But in the case of the French defenders of Verdun, this could certainly be taken for granted. Besides, the principal resistance to be encountered by the infantry outside the works themselves consisted in permanently constructed trenches which had been very much strengthened during the previous three months. With such conditions before us, it was impossible to expect the quick success of Liège, Maubeuge and Antwerp, more particularly as in this case the garrison would be reinforced according to requirements.

That is why in my Army Headquarters we laid it down as an absolutely indispensable condition of our enterprise that we should have at our command strong attacking artillery with an unlimited supply of ammunition, and for the purpose of launching a methodical infantry attack, many more troops and a much more generous provision of Pioneer siege detachments. As, moreover, von Strantz's Army Detachment had come to grips with the enemy, in that direction too there would



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be an enormous expenditure of ammunition, which the 5th Army must somehow meet. With the forces on our left and right occupied with merely defensive tactics, the taking of Verdun would devolve chiefly upon our army. We had to reckon with the probability that during the attack itself, we should have to meet an enemy push against the right flank of the 6th Reserve Corps. If all went well we might, with the available ammunition, reach as far as the northern line of the forts. If, however, we began to suffer from a shortage of ammunition there, it was doubtful whether we should be able to hold the conquered position for long under the enemy fire from the fortress.

But as General Headquarters made my Headquarters responsible for the beginning and the outcome of the siege, and my army had always to be kept strong and ready to fight, in order to protect the whole of the communications of the Army of the West with the home-land, there was nothing else for me to do, until such time as I had received all that I required in troops and munitions for the fight, than to form the sad resolve of postponing the opening of the attack on Verdun. On the other hand this implied that we were confronted with the uninviting task of continuing to hold an enemy in check, who, while we were forced to economize our ammunition as much as possible, grew every day more and more aggressive.

In the foregoing, I have entered exhaustively into the question of the attack on Verdun—a question not ripe for judgment at that stage in the campaign—because I wished to show that in my Headquarters, in spite of all the very natural desire we felt for action, and in spite of the pressure exercised by certain persons in General Headquarters, it was, after all, a thoroughly cool and sober consideration of the chances of success which led us to decline an undertaking, the happy outcome of which did not seem to us sufficiently assured. When later on, in February, 1916, we undertook to carry through the operation, the conditions for its success were in many respects very much more favourable.

At this time His Majesty agreed entirely with my decision. On the 8th November he was given a verbal account by my Army Commander of the reasons which had led to a postponement of the attack on Verdun. They met with his approval.



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The extensive preparations had, however, been useful to all the commanding officers and troops that had been concerned with them, as also particularly to Army Headquarters.

Only by means of the greatest exertions on the part of private industry in the production of munitions could a change come about ; and according to a communication I had received, from von Gontard, the Director of the German Arms and Munitions Factories, this work was well on its way.

During the time that our attention had been concentrated on Verdun, our daring hopes of a victory by the 4th Army in Flanders had not been realized, nor had Hindenburg's first successes, with the 9th Army in Poland, fulfilled their promise. The general situation remained as undecided as it had ever been, and there appeared to be no chance of an early change in our favour even after Turkey's entry into the war. Nevertheless this last occurrence was extremely significant, for it was only by its means that we were able to keep the Dardanelles closed and thus cut off Russia from her allies.

On the 3rd November Enver Pasha, the Vice-Commander-in-Chief of the Turkish forces on Land and Sea, replied to my telegram of congratulations on the Declaration of War as follows : " The Army of His Majesty the Sultan thanks your Imperial Highness and the German 5th Army for the friendly greetings, and hopes that in faithful comradeship with the glorious Army of His Majesty the German Kaiser, it will overpower our common enemies."

With this object in view, the Sheikh ul Islam had issued a *Fetva* according to which a fight to the death against the three enemy Powers became the faithful duty of every Moslem. The hope that this would lead the whole world of Islam into a Holy War was not, however, to be realized.

Owing to the postponement of the attack on Verdun, the 5th Army was once more in a position to surrender troops for other fronts, and it received the order to withdraw its 9th Reserve Division from the north-east front of the fortress, to equip it with heavy artillery, and to hand it over for the purpose of reinforcing the attacking troops in Flanders. There, to the south of Nieupoort, the enemy had limited our freedom of movement by laying large tracts of the country under water ; but this served our own ends also to this extent, that it enabled the 4th Army to rest its northern flank on the inundation and

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to confine its attacks on the line Dixmude-Armentières-La Bassée. General von Falkenhayn still hoped that in this way he could, beyond the Yser Canal, effect a decisive turn in the situation on the Western Front. My brave 9th Reserve Division, under Lieut.-General von Guretzky-Cornitz, played a glorious part in these severe battles, but unfortunately it suffered considerable losses.

### THE FIRST FORMATION OF ARMY GROUPS

Though they received less notice than the great attacks in Flanders, which aimed at obtaining a decision, the fighting at close quarters in the Argonne Forest, in the area of the trusty 16th Army Corps, continued to rage unflinchingly. Fierce bayonet fights, in which my brave Oels Jägers were also engaged, frequently gave proof of German superiority. The army front stretched at that time from the west of the Argonne, both sides of Servon (18th Reserve Corps) over the heights between Cuisy and Malancourt, as far as Forges on the Meuse (6th Reserve Corps). On the east bank it ran from Consenvoye, through Moirey-Azannes-Ornes, to Etain (5th Reserve Corps with 47th Reserve Division). Here Strantz's Army Detachment, which was under my orders, joined up with us, and the line continued through Buzy-Combres-St. Rémy-Leuzy-Lamortville (5th Army Corps with 33rd Reserve Division and von Waldow's Landwehr Division) Senonville-St. Mihiel-Apremont (3rd Bavarian Army Corps with Bavarian Supplementary Division) Laheyville-Regniéville as far as the Moselle (10th and Guards' Supplementary Division). The brazen ring grew stronger and stronger, as fast as the earthworks grew. And this was all the more necessary, seeing that according to instructions received by us from the Chief of the General Staff of the Army in the Field, on the 12th November, large numbers of troops were to be released for the East. By making an unflinching stand, the fronts were also able to give the home-country time to effect a careful stocktaking and organization of our raw material for the purposes of war supplies, clothing, equipment and food. This had unfortunately not been foreseen in peace-time; but in view of the enemy's blockade it grew more important every day.

When all the serious fighting was confined to the East, as

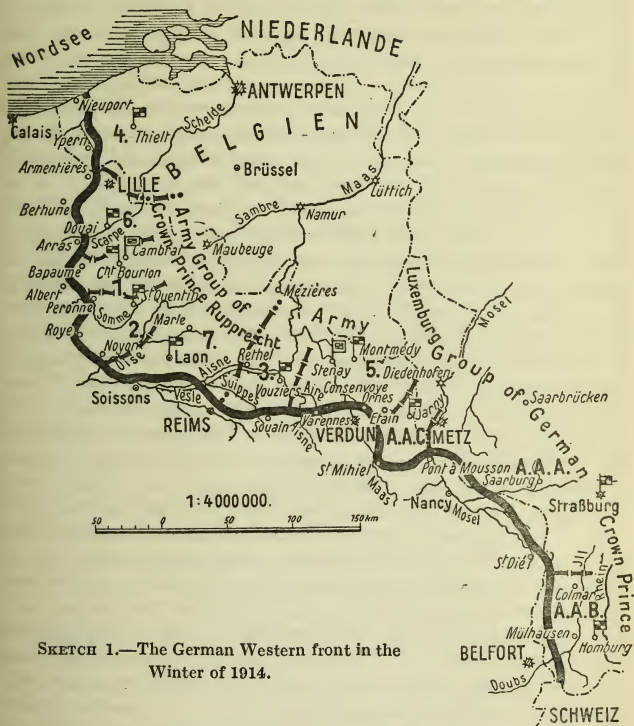
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it was at the end of November, the Western front was reduced entirely to defensive tactics. Only by the exploitation of favourable opportunities for small local trench engagements was the fighting spirit of the troops maintained. On the 26th November, the West front was divided into three Army Groups. The Crown Prince of Bavaria had the 4th, 6th and 2nd Armies, "Generaloberst" von Heeringen had the 1st, 7th and 3rd under his command, while as to myself, in addition to the 5th Army, including Strantz's Army Detachment and the fortress of Metz, I was also entrusted with Falkenhausen and Gaede's Army Detachments, which extended as far as the Swiss frontier. It was our duty to effect the local reinforcement of troops and the necessary reliefs by forming army reserves out of our own strength; further, we were held responsible for the whole of the fighting in the area of our Army Group, and for placing forces at the disposal of General Headquarters whenever we were called upon to do so. Among the forces which at the end of November were transported to the East, the 25th Reserve Division was taken from my army. In its stead, in the formation of the 18th Reserve Corps, I placed the 27th Infantry Division, which was all that I now had of the 13th Army Corps. Some time previously the 5th Army had handed the Hollen Cavalry Corps over to the right wing of the army, where it found an infinitely more favourable field for its activities than in front of Verdun. What made our task particularly difficult was the fact that the enormous consumption of ammunition in Flanders and the East compelled us to endure the enemy's artillery fire in our muddy winter trenches almost without reply. The physical and nervous powers of our men, who, thank God, proved to be sound to the core, stood the test of these trials. The natural manner in which the will to hold on at all costs frequently expressed itself among the troops in the front line, in the form of cheerfulness and reckless merriment, earned my most hearty admiration, and made them the object of my special care. In return they showed me both gratitude and devotion.

The extended front of the Army Group made considerable demands on the Army Headquarters in the matter of attending to incessant requests and proposals, and in the husbanding of quickly diminishing and exiguous resources. Meanwhile, however, the tactical position was obviously coming to a head.

## Retreat. Trench Warfare begins

The great keenness of the enemy was to be seen from a captured order of General Joffre, according to which our numerical weakness on the Western front was to be actively exploited for the purpose of trying to effect a break-through. Thanks to the measures taken at threatened points for a timely readi-



SKETCH 1.—The German Western front in the Winter of 1914.

ness for action, these attempts were not only beaten off without causing a serious crisis, but at certain points actually led to successful counter-attacks. This was so at Vauquois, east of the Argonne, at St. Mihiel on the Meuse, in the Priests' Forest west of Pont-à-Mousson; and against reinforcements which advanced out of the Vosges Valley of Thann, it led to the capture



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of Steinbach and Sennheim. These successes were due, among other things, to the mobility of our Army Group's reserves, to which General Fuchs' 16th Infantry Division also belonged. But in December these reserves were sent to Conflans to be at the disposal of Strantz's Army Detachment, and then to Mülhausen to repulse the French attack at Thann, already mentioned, and from there finally sent a brigade for the 3rd Army, so severely menaced in the region north of Somme Py. Thither the 6th Reserve Corps also dispatched (temporarily) a reserve of three battalions with heavy howitzers and mortars. The pleasant fact that our carefully prepared counter-attacks and independent engagements practically always succeeded, and brought in considerable bodies of prisoners—the number of French troops taken prisoner in the Argonne during the month of December, 1914, amounted to 4,000—was a significant proof that, in the matter of morale, our troops, to whom this kind of fighting was in the early days completely foreign, had quickly gained the upper hand against an enemy whose character and methods of training were much more suited to position warfare.

In view of the position of my Army Headquarters behind the 5th Army in Stenay, where it remained, owing, first, to the well-developed communications all round Verdun, and, secondly, to its convenient proximity to General Headquarters at Mézières, it was absolutely necessary to place the whole system of the commands, as far as the Swiss frontier, on a more rigid basis. The Army Commander and his Chief Staff Officer, therefore, carried out the new arrangements that had been ordered, by means of local conferences with the Army Detachments, and in Metz, and proceeded in such a manner that Strantz's Army Detachment retained the command as far as the Moselle, and was supported by Metz, which was the principal post on the lines of communication. The Governor of Metz, assisted by a Chief of Staff who, in the person of General Kempf, had acquired a thorough experience of the fortress in peace time, was placed directly under the orders of the Army Headquarters. Falkenhäusen's Army Detachment removed its Headquarters to Strasburg, and in all tactical matters took over the command of Gaede's Army Detachment as well. The means of rapid mutual support in the form of reserves and war equipment were assured by a number of trains held in readiness at the railway stations of Montmédy, Metz, Strasburg and Mülhausen.



## Retreat. Trench Warfare begins

The clearer form that had been given to the system of commands was intended to have a good effect on the general discipline of the troops. On the occasion of my various drives to visit the troops, particularly when I went to large railway centres, with their lines of communication arrangements, I had become aware, from time to time, of signs of an unsatisfactory spirit among certain Landwehr and Landsturm formations, and in Metz and Strasburg I even observed apparent cases of skulking and shirking.

Our original optimistic judgment of the situation in the East had been based upon the fact that we had hoped a decisive victory would be won there which would even have its effect on the operations in the West. But in spite of the enormous Russian losses in dead and wounded, to which the 80,000 unwounded prisoners captured in twenty days must be added, Hindenburg's operations at last terminated after they had reached their culminating point in the fighting round Lodz and Lowicz, with the frontal retreat of the Russians towards the Vistula in December, without a complete decision having been obtained. General von Falkenhayn, who only with great reluctance had resolved to seek a decision in the East, very soon returned in his heart of hearts to the view that the decision of the war was to be sought in the West; though the lack of available forces certainly prevented him from realizing his plans at once. For the time being all that we did was to discuss the strategy for the longed-for moment when we should resume the offensive in the West. Thus in December, my Army Headquarters was asked how it would be able to set the operations in the West moving once more, if it were given a further six army corps with ample supplies of war material. The answer, which was brief and to the point, was duly sent after Lines of Communication Inspectorate No. 5 had expressed his concurrence, and was to the effect that the provisioning of even that amount of additional troops was certainly possible. We recommended our offensive along a broad front against the re-entrant of the enemy's line near Verdun. It was to be launched simultaneously against the strong flank of the enemy's wing in the Argonne, against the position west of the Argonne, and against the Fortress of Verdun itself. The object we hoped to achieve by the operation was to surround the French field troops concentrated in the neighbourhood of the fortress, by

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out-flanking them with our two extreme attacking wings, both to the south round the Argonne, and across the Meuse south of Verdun. Furthermore, we flattered ourselves that we should succeed, by forcing the enemy to resist us in fuller strength near Verdun, in making him weaken his other fronts, and thus give the German Higher Command the chance of resuming the offensive somewhere. But our plight on the Western front in the winter of 1914-15 was such that it did not allow our proposals to be realized. I do not even remember that General von Falkenhayn ever defined his attitude towards it in writing.

The first Christmas in the field! It brought our faithful soldiers an almost extravagant increase of loving gifts from their grateful and sympathetic friends at home. Innumerable field-post-office letters full of touching sentiments formed a solid bridge between the Christmas festivities in the dug-outs and hutments, and the more elaborate celebrations among the loved ones at home. The God of the Weather treated us kindly. After weeks of the most ghastly rain, a wintry frost paved a clean way over the endless mud of the front-line trenches to our soldiers' comrades in the neighbouring trenches.

I shall never forget the first Christmas of the war. For us Germans, Holy Christmastide is, after all, the most glorious time of the year, when even the heart of the hardest of men softens at the thought of his own childhood, his home and his family. Thus I felt particularly drawn to my field-grey boys on this occasion, and I steered my car in the direction of the Argonne. I spent the afternoon in the hutments of the Württembergians with the 120th and 124th Regiments. Thick snow lay on the hilltops above this Forest of the Dead. The shells howled their monotonous and hideous melody, and from time to time the sacred silence was rent by the burst of a machine-gun's fire. And in between, one could hear the dull drone of the trench-mortar shells. Nevertheless, the spirits of the men were everywhere very cheerful. Every dug-out had its Christmas tree, and from all directions came the sound of rough men's voices singing our exquisite old Christmas songs.

Kirchhoff, the concert singer, who was attached to our Headquarters Staff for a while as orderly officer, sang his Christmas songs on that same sacred evening in the front-line

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trenches of the 130th Regiment. And on the following day he told me that some French soldiers, who had climbed up their parapet, had continued to applaud, until at last he gave them an encore. Thus, amid the bitter realities of trench warfare, with all its squalor, a Christmas song had worked a miracle and thrown a bridge from man to man.

## CHAPTER V

### THE YEAR 1915

#### NEW YEAR REFLECTIONS

THE New Year, 1914-15, offered to the serious and calculating mind special occasion for reflection, reaching out beyond the immediate sphere of the local military situation to include that of the war as a whole. It will be understood that at that time, when events were developing, I took a view in many respects different and more favourable than in the light of subsequent historical facts I do to-day. My whole disposition was that of an optimist. People whose natures can never rise superior to the little word "but" I had always found unsympathetic. In my view they merely served to cripple the efficiency and energy of others. I was, however, very careful not to let my optimism degenerate into illusion. Indeed, anyone seeing the pure patriotic fervour of our people, the hush of party strife, the readiness for sacrifice, the straining of every nerve to bring our full man-power, our whole economic strength to bear on the end in view, and the mighty achievements that these efforts had brought about on every side, had good grounds for believing in a favourable termination, even if a sweeping victory could no longer be contemplated. This splendid people was proving that it was inwardly sound as a bell, its masses had at least not yet fallen to materialism. But in spite of this reassuring national attitude, I did not even then cherish any illusions that the situation of the Central Powers had become other than one of intense anxiety through the failure of our offensive in the West and the collapse of our Austro-Hungarian Allies.

What filled me with the greatest anxiety was the realization that time was not working in our favour. Consequently everything depended on avoiding a long duration of the war.

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This, moreover, had been the basic idea of the Schlieffen plan of operations; to bring the war on several fronts to the speediest possible conclusion by swift, decisive blows, for it was clearly realized that in a prolonged struggle of endurance the Central Powers, hemmed in on every side, would be in danger, like a besieged fortress, of at once being cut off from the outer world and starved out. We could not, in my opinion, allow ourselves to be drawn into a war of exhaustion in the hope of holding out longer than our adversaries. This was ruled out, among other reasons, by our limited strength in men and material compared with that of the Allied Powers. Far too little had been done in peace-time to make us economically independent of the rest of the world, practically nothing to ensure the systematic mobilization of our resources. Whether Main Headquarters were determined to follow the path of Schlieffen by ruthlessly throwing in our full national strength, and after the failure of our first attempt again devoting themselves as early as possible to forcing a decision, was outside my sphere of knowledge. Certain doubts were already raised in our minds when Hindenburg's November offensive had failed to exert the expected influence of a decisive campaign, largely owing to the inadequate and belated flow of the reinforcements from the West. But we consoled ourselves with the thought that the responsible leader of all German operations, might, by his careful economy of power, have wished to avoid too serious a weakening of the Army in the West, with a view to reopening the attack in France as early as possible. That there were differences of opinion between him and the Commander-in-Chief in the East as to which theatre of war was to be the scene of the next attempt at a decisive campaign I was aware. But from the position in which I was at that time placed I could see too little of the general situation and its individual details to form a definite opinion, even a private one, upon the problem. Of this much only deep reflection had from the beginning firmly convinced me. I will repeat it: The war of existence made it imperatively necessary for Germany that the one goal should be unswervingly striven for, that the conduct of the war should as soon as possible revert to its offensive character, directed towards a decisive termination. This applied also to the war at sea. Here the whole-hearted pursuit of the submarine war



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offered the most favourable chances, since the opportunity had been missed of throwing the High Seas Fleet into the scales from the outset as an offensive weapon.

With regard to our Austro-Hungarian Allies, I could not help feeling the gravest misgivings. The flower of their army had been cut down in the first six weeks of the war. The effects of the severe shaking which they had suffered in those preliminary battles in Galicia and South Poland were still making their influence felt and raising crisis after crisis. The distress of Austria-Hungary had become, in Hindenburg's words, the weak point in the operations of our eastern army. Even in Serbia early successes had been followed by a serious setback. The heir-presumptive, the Archduke Karl Franz Joseph, assured me at this very time, during a visit to Stenay, that the rumours current about the internal dislocation of the army in general and the untrustworthiness of the Czech regiments in particular were, alas, founded on truth. The Imperial Chancellor, in a conversation at the beginning of January, painted for me in the blackest colours the political situation to which the ineffectiveness of the Danube monarchy had given rise. He told of the supplies of munitions from Italy to France and war preparations by our former fellow-member of the Triple Alliance, and severely blamed the reluctance of the Vienna Cabinet to make concessions to Italy. Moreover, the attitude of Rumania already seemed uncertain, while every effort of diplomacy could not succeed in bringing Bulgaria to join the Central Powers. Thus I was more than ever convinced that the chief burden of the war rested on the shoulders of Germany, and that the issue would depend entirely upon the internal strength of the German people.

### BATTLES ON THE FRONT OF THE ARMY GROUP IN JANUARY

On the wing of my army group which rested on neutral Switzerland the French showed lively offensive activity at the New Year. They advanced in considerable strength from the Vosges valley and attacked at Oberburnhaupt in Sundgau, as well as further north on the mountains and at Buchenkopf, south of Diedolshausen, mostly without success. Though this guerrilla warfare was only of local importance, the eagerness of the enemy to capture the foothills of the

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Vosges, with a view to a wider control of the Mülhausen plain, had to be checked. Accordingly, the request of Gaede's Army Detachment for considerable artillery reinforcement for the capture of the Thann mountains was granted. On the 22nd January, 1915, Hartmannsweiler Kopf, which had been the scene of so much fighting, fell into our hands, and it was intended to develop this success in the direction Wolfskopf-Amselkopf-Thann.

In the Argonne, where fighting was always in progress, the French opened the New Year with overwhelming artillery attacks, so that here, too, reinforced artillery had to be sent up at the expense of quieter sections of the front. As early as the 8th January this measure was replied to by the 33rd Infantry Division, and on the 29th by the 27th Infantry Division, while, thanks to the brave conduct of the 8th Reserve Jäger, the Hessian Landwehr and my Würtemberger, 2,000 prisoners were brought in by counter-attacks. The 16th A.C., which had seen heavy fighting, was stiffened by more battalions of the 13th and 43rd Landwehr brigades. They formed, together with the 5th and 6th Jäger battalions, a fourth division of this Army Corps.

By command of His Majesty the Emperor, I had the pleasure of decorating General von Mudra, the excellent commanding officer, whose true soldierly qualities had transmitted themselves to his troops, with the order *Pour le Mérite*. He was the soul of the offensive operations by which the Argonne was defended. "Wherever the 16th A.C. and anything in its area attacks a breach is made"—this was the spirit with which leader and troops equally were inspired. In order that the nation might follow intelligently the heroism of these world-fighters, descriptions by distinguished war correspondents of striking episodes in already completed operations were transmitted to the German Press. But who could imagine existence at the front in the mud of the trenches during the storms and rains of the winter months without having been there himself, or at least seen the inundations stretching over kilometre after kilometre along the valley of the Meuse. The daily *communiqués*, which often appeared to me so uninspiring in their stark brevity, gave no idea of that silent heroism which duty called for daily and hourly among the German troops at the front without hope of reward or recognition.

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To show what a spirit lived in our peoples, with what loyalty they followed their old officers, I should like here to insert an episode which was related to me as follows by an eye-witness :

A heavy battery of my division had been brought up along mud-clogged paths with unspeakable effort, to occupy a position on the side of a hill, from which their guns could relieve the infantry, who were being sorely tried by the fire of the much stronger French artillery, so far as the severely rationed ammunition would allow.

But the battery, brought up by the firm hand of its popular commanding officer, was not yet ready to open fire when a heavy hail of steel swept down upon it. Its commander regarded the stress of his comrades in the firing line as of greater and more urgent importance than the cautious advance of the battery. Salvo after salvo of well-aimed fire from the watchful French artillery soon put two guns completely out of action ; many of the men serving them lay bleeding on the ground. Realizing the futility of any further effort or attempt to give help, the divisional commander ordered the cessation of the hopeless artillery duel, the men to abandon their guns temporarily and the battery to change position later. It required sharp orders to the brave officer commanding the battery, who only reluctantly obeyed, before this could be effected and the withdrawal of the guns postponed until dark. But in vain ! At dawn on the following day, the brave battery commander fell at the moment he was himself giving a hand to bring under cover his badly damaged guns. But the spirit of the fallen leader still lived in his men ; the following night his faithful sergeant-major brought the rest of the battery into safety with heavy loss of life.

We buried the brave officer one sunny winter's day in the bare little village cemetery. A peaceful day at the front. All who could get free were present to do the last honour to this man who had shown himself faithful unto death. After a stirring address by the divisional chaplain, one after the other stepped forward to throw a handful of earth into the grave of their dear comrade.

Last came the sergeant-major—a sharp click together of his spurs—with difficulty controlling his inward emotion, his voice strangled by grief, but as though it were a natural action

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he had as yet neglected to perform, his abrupt official report rang out loud and distinct over the open soldier's grave of his old captain: "I have also to report, sir, that we have brought back the guns!"

A movement passed through the whole assembly, a single sob from all these stern men who stood broken-hearted round the open grave.

It was only with a halting voice and tears in his eyes that the old divisional chaplain was able to utter the final prayer.

### TRENCH WARFARE IN FEBRUARY AND MARCH

After Main Headquarters had decided to institute the new winter formations—four and a half Army Corps—mainly in the east, it could be foreseen with certainty that we had a heavy task before us. The severer the struggle with Russia for a decision became, the more necessary it was to reckon with a relief offensive by our enemy in the west, France. All the Chiefs of Staff on the front, from the Argonne to the Moselle, were accordingly instructed during the next few weeks that they were to economize in ammunition, confine themselves to the defensive and to strengthening their position and prepare for heavy enemy attacks. Wherever local operations of an offensive nature were contemplated, care was to be taken beforehand to ensure that the cost in men and material was justified by the prospects of success. As a matter of fact, there was now plenty of rifle ammunition to hand, but the output of artillery ammunition from our converted private factories was still very inadequate. Moreover, the supplies available were mostly sent to the east.

On the right wing of my army the ever-active General von Steuben of the 18th R.C. had been preparing, with all the resources of military science, the systematic capture of Hill 191, north of Massiges, which commanded the right flank of his own position and so caused him a good deal of annoyance. In this he had secured the co-operation of the 8th R.C. of the 3rd Army, his right-hand neighbour. Strenuous mining was being carried out both on the enemy side and our own, and success would fall to the quicker worker. Accordingly, on the 3rd February, after short but powerful artillery



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fire, the enemy front line of trenches opposite Hill 191 was blown into the air; the attack, which immediately followed, and in which the 80th Reserve Infantry Regiment played a distinguished part, brought the desired position with more than 600 French prisoners into our hands. We were only just in time. The captured French commanding officer had intended to explode his mines four hours later. Furious counter-attacks by the alarmed French reserves met with no success. Only the Corps staff in Autry felt the weight of the enemy's desire for revenge, and had to move back its headquarters to Termes. When I expressed my gratitude to the victorious 80th Reserve Regiment, with its bearded Landwehr men and sprinkling of fiery young soldiers, and distributed iron crosses in the name of His Majesty, I felt, as I had already felt so often during this war, when I saw the front company strength of scarcely thirty men, that with such true Germans devoted to duty, what was required was not so much outward gratitude as sympathetic personal understanding of their sacrifices for the Fatherland!

In the Argonne the silver streamers of the star shells hissed up through the February night and illuminated the success of the 86th Infantry Brigade with its numerous prisoners. Of General von Luttwitz's 33rd I.D. I saw the trusty 135th Regiment, which for months had performed excellent service, mostly to the south. In a wooded hollow near Apremont the 27th Landwehr Regiment had constructed with astonishing devotion and skill a hut village for one or two battalions taken out of the line to rest. The corporals' mess-room on the slope, which gave the greatest protection against enemy fire, and was the more hidden, was comfortably furnished and installed with stoves, lights and pictures. The outer wall was covered with ivy. In the trough of the valley hidden springs murmured and dry paths provided good communication. Here the command "Lights out" did not indicate the need for cover from the enemy's view, but the desire for long-sought, refreshing sleep after the labours of the front line, the dull roar of which was here scarcely audible. The *embusqué* had no idea of what was going on up there at Vauquois.

Here I should like to mention, too, the splendidly equipped hut village which the Würtembergers had built behind their fighting line in the wooded position behind the Argonne wood,



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for their resting battalions and engineering shops. The *spiritus rector* of this camp was a certain Captain Zöppritz, a large manufacturer in civil life and a genius in organization. One day I revisited the scene of his activities, and found, to my astonishment, in the blockhouses a large number of beautifully-enamelled bath-tubs. To my question where they came from he answered with a shrewd smile: "I saw to these." Then I remembered. On a journey from Stenay to Charleville we had come upon a large number of excellent bath-tubs which had been erected in the meadows near Sedan as cattle troughs. "Great Scott, Zöppritz, these are the cattle troughs of L. of C. 3." There came the classic reply: "Yes, sir, but I thought the cattle could get along without baths." Captain Zöppritz was a man who carried through everything he took in hand.

The enemy attempts to break through our very thin wall of troops failed everywhere in spite of very heavy artillery preparation. Main Headquarters helped us against the heavy armament of the fortress of Verdun by sending up several batteries of the heaviest type. The 16th A.C. were able to bring up a 30.5 cm. mortar battery, though inadequately supplied with ammunition, on each side of the Argonne at Binarville and Apremont. Behind the front of the 5th R.C. a 42 cm. mortar in the Hingry wood, south of Billy, smashed the armoured casement of Douaumont fort. A 38 cm. naval quick-firing battery at Loison, under the command of the efficient Commander Schulte, brought the heights of "The Dead Man," 28 kilometres away on the other side of the Meuse, under its deadly shrapnel fire. The 6th R.C., on the 26th February, achieved a noteworthy success in the wood of Malancourt, north-east of Avocourt, Reddemann flame-throwers being used for the first time. The 10th Reserve Regiment and Bavarian 7th Landwehr Regiment drove the French out of a trench system 1,800 metres broad and 500 metres deep, and successfully drove off all counter-attacks.

In view of the heroism of our troops it was the duty of the higher and highest commands not to close their eyes to several unhappy and sinister facts. The 5th R.C., to which heavy responsibilities had been entrusted on the right bank of the Meuse, indeed succeeded brilliantly at this time in warding off enemy attacks in the Caures wood, south-east of Flabas, but

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the watchful commanding officers of our troops, who had here received a strong admixture of Polish reinforcements, learned the discouraging fact that some members of this race were yielding treacherously to the enticements of French pamphlets, which promised a dazzling life of ease and luxury, with abundant supplies of every kind, especially alcohol. We had to face the facts boldly, and put a stop to treacherous desertion by suggesting that large numbers of Poles should be relieved. It is true that grouping of our units according to nationality was of great moral value, worth the most serious consideration in spite of all the difficulties of finding reserves. But the departure from this valuable principle, which had begun even before the war, by distributing unreliable frontier nationalities among all the other units, proved in war time a fatal yielding of our Army administration to the inadmissible demands of the national representatives. I have met and appreciated splendid upholders of the German ideal in every rank of the army among our foreign-speaking border peoples, but even they themselves often admitted that the strong love of home of their uneducated peasants, as a result of their economic and linguistic ties, was not always in sympathy with Greater Germany. Main Headquarters fell in with our proposals as far as was possible by exchanging politically unreliable elements for pure Germans.

The heavy, costly fighting by Strantz's Army Detachment culminated on the Côte in mine and trench warfare for the possession of the Combres hill. On the south front facing Toul, at Ailly, near the Camp des Romains, at Apremont, opposite the uncaptured Fort de Liouville, and at the Flirey cross-roads there was never any lull. The Priesterwald, north-west of the Pont à Mousson, was also beginning to be the scene of heavy fighting. The excellent reserve divisions on this front suffered from their name, which caused them unjustly to be held in slight esteem, and also from their defective organization, in which the want of regimental staffs made itself particularly felt. The pride of the independent battalions, in standing directly under the brigade, was not sufficient to atone for the absence of that most important personality the regimental commander. The equipment of the *Ersatz* divisions with ammunition columns, trains and administrative staffs was quite lamentable. The army detachments of Falkenhausen and Galde, whose

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fronts, compared with the rest, might be regarded as subsidiary theatres of war, were better equipped.

The 3rd Army in Champagne, the right-hand neighbours of the Crown Prince's Army Group, had to resist stubborn attempts to break through by the Western Powers in the direction of Béthel, as a reply to our great offensive in East Prussia begun at the beginning of February. We wondered how the French nation could ever replace the hecatombs of losses. We had as yet no idea to what an extent they would be able to exploit their reservoirs of man-power in the African colonies. I had to help to hold the threatened front of the 3rd Army by sending up an infantry brigade to the area between Somme Py and Challerange, and convinced myself personally of the difficulties of their situation owing to unfavourably placed positions, bad communications and dreadful living conditions. No one, seeing these figures, white with the chalky soil, their faces tanned by wind and weather, could wonder if, under the terrible stress of physical and nervous endurance, weaker natures lost all their war illusions and collapsed. We did not enjoy the invaluable advantages of our enemies, who were able to make good the wear and tear of nerve-strength by frequent reliefs and periods of rest. The soul of our organization work at the War Ministry, the highly respected Colonel von Wrisberg, told me personally at Stenay that the new formations and reserves in February, 1915, already equalled the whole war strength of the German Army of 1870-1871! But what was the good of that in face of the almost inexhaustible resources of men and material which were at the disposal of our enemies surrounding us?

A moral fillip was given to our patient endurance in holding off the heavy attacks on the Western front by the victorious news from the East, where Hindenburg was smashing the Russian 10th Army in the winter battle of the Masurian Lakes. Enviously our thoughts lingered with our comrades on the Eastern front, who had the opportunity to win fresh laurels in the war of movement—though, of course, under the most difficult conditions imaginable. Meanwhile, the tense expectations that the victory would develop into an operation deciding the whole campaign were not fulfilled. On the contrary, in March, the Eastern front also stiffened into a war of positions, as had already happened in Galicia and Poland. Thus we finally stuck fast

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on all fronts. Everywhere our arms were victorious, but nowhere did the effect produced reach the grand decisive scale. The situation of the Austrians grew worse from month to month, in spite of all the help that we devoted to them. Turkey also was very hard pressed by the Dardanelles attack.

In the west, the first half of March was still marked by the French offensive on the 3rd Army in Champagne, carried out with tremendous expenditure of man-power and ammunition, but thrown back with very heavy losses. This called for incessant alertness and readiness to furnish support from my army group also. At this time I endeavoured to get with my own eyes the clearest possible impression of the conditions under which the army detachments of Strantz, Falkenhausen and Galde, which were in my command, were grappling with their heavy task of defence. So journeys of observation took me into the battle area between the Meuse and the Mosel, where fighting continued uninterrupted: with the 5th A.C. for the possession of Combres hill; with the 3rd Bavarian A.C. in Ailly wood; with the Guard *Ersatz* division south of Thiaumont, and the 8th E.D. in the Priesterwald.

After a visit of the Metz Government, I heard, on the 2nd March, in Homburg, headquarters of Galde's Army Detachment, an exposition of the general situation on the Alsace-Vosges front. In particular the difficulties of the organization for control of the population in the Imperial provinces and precautions against spies called for special measures, which often caused friction with the Civil Authorities, who seemed genuinely unable to realize the deadly seriousness of the measures adopted. On the sectors held by the divisions of Kuntze and Fuchs I was able to observe our unfavourable position far down below in Sundgau, facing the French positions on the foothills of the Vosges. The Bavarian divisions were in a more favourable position north and south of the Münster valley. There, by sledge and on horseback, through Dreiähren-Zell and Wasserburg, I obtained from the observation posts of our mountain batteries a vivid impression of the difficulties under which war was being waged in the mountain forests deep in snow. From the observation post of a Bavarian 10 cm. battery I was able myself to direct the fire upon French chasseurs who were digging positions in the Schluchtpass and on the "Kahlen Waren." The ruins of the stately Schlucht Hote



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were distinctly visible just in front of us. As a student I had been there on a walking tour in the Vosges. Among the welfare arrangements of the Army detachments I saw the well-organized convalescent home at Schoppenweser, with a splendid view of the proud Hohkönigsburg. Then I visited Generaloberst Freiherr von Falkenhausen, carrying through his duties with wonderful mental and physical vigour at his headquarters at Strassburg. Among the staff and administrative services exemplary industry and organization were obvious on every side, and among the fighting troops an alert, trustworthy morale. Constant telephonic communication with my Headquarters Staff in Stenay, at the same time, kept vividly before my mind the heavy French attacks of these early March days on the elevated position of what was once the village of Vauquois. On the 4th March they attained such violence that I hastened through Zabern-Pfalzburg-Saarburg-Dieuze and Metz to Stenay. There, on the evening of the 5th, the intelligence officers of the Headquarters Staff, who, in important fighting, were always on the spot, reported that we had been successful in beating off the enemy, as I could myself observe from Véry village. In a counter-attack of unexampled bravery the König's Infantry Regiment had won back Vauquois, which had been lost, at the point of the bayonet.

Immediately after my return from the expedition to the Alsace-Lorraine front Main Headquarters countermanded the division of the Western Army into army groups, so that the Army Detachments of Falkenhausen and Galde became independent again. Only Strantz's Army Detachment remained henceforward attached to my command.

For the rest, with the increased lull in Champagne that began to set in soon after the middle of March, local fighting at the hottest points of the army group front died down appreciably. Main Headquarters was moved back to Mézières, and was engaged in disposing the reserves in greater strength behind the whole Western front. I made use of the pause in the fighting due to the exhaustion of the enemy to pay a short visit to my wife and children in Berlin. It was my first four days' leave. Immediately after my return fresh successful defensive fighting took place on the Combres hill and on the south front of Strantz's Army Detachment facing Toul.



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### FIGHTING BY STRANTZ'S ARMY DETACHMENT IN THE SPRING AND SUMMER

On the 1st April I had a long conversation with the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army about the military situation on both fronts. I was convinced that the decision of the war could only be attained in France against the Western Powers, and that this would demand the throwing in of the whole strength of the German Army. This fundamental idea must, in my opinion, remain paramount in considering our situation in the multiple-fronted war throughout the whole campaign. After the attempt to realize it in September, 1914, had proved abortive and was recognized as abortive, I held that it should at least be kept as the key idea of the further prosecution of the war. Meanwhile, the Eastern theatre of war had won such far-reaching importance and extorted the expenditure of such considerable fighting strength, that all my constant efforts in favour of making the Western front the scene of the decision appeared premature. Russia must first be beaten in the field and, if possible, be brought to make a separate peace. When, therefore, at the end of January, General von Falkenhayn decided, not without opposition, to make the East the main theatre it would, in my belief, have been in accordance with the above-mentioned fundamental idea to throw on to the Eastern front such a force that a strategic decision could have been forced there. Had that happened we should have had the necessary freedom in our rear to set ourselves to the most difficult task, the final decision in the West. General von Falkenhayn held the contrary view that our task in the East was accomplished so long as the offensive power of Russia was crippled for a considerable period of time, and accordingly was unwilling to send and fix any more of our strength there than was required for the end in view. Obviously he was influenced in this by justified anxiety for the Western front, which he could not expose to the danger of a break-through. It was, however, not to be long before the Chief of the General Staff was forced by the situation of our allies to seek the decision in the East, to leave the West front meanwhile to look after itself and so to weaken it.

At the beginning of April there was every sign of an immi-

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nent strong enemy attack in front of Strantz's Army Detachment, so that we were able in good time to send up infantry and artillery reserves from the 18th R.C., the 5th R.C., and the Metz Government behind the threatened fronts. As early as the 5th April severe attacks were opened on the front line from Marchéville in the Woëvre plain through St. Mihiel to Priesterwald on the Mosel, in which two new French army corps took part, the hottest points being Marchéville-Maizeray and again, as always, Combres hill, Ailly-Apremont, Flirey and the Priesterwald. As well as the 5th and 3rd Bavarian A.C. and the reserve divisions the 5th Landwehr division particularly distinguished itself. Although all the attacks broke down with heavy losses, the placing in readiness of a strong reserve to prevent at all costs an enemy break-through between the Meuse and the Mosel in the direction of the Briey Basin seemed to us an urgent necessity. In reply to the personal representation of my Chief of Staff at Main Headquarters, the latter placed the two newly-formed 113th and 121st Divisions, which were resting at Sedan and St. Avold, at our disposal, so that we remained masters of the situation and won back lost parts of the line with fresh reserves. The attacks in the plain and on Combres on the one hand, and through Flirey-Apremont on the other, lasting as they did for several days, made the enemy's intention quite clear—to pinch off the salient held by the 3rd Bavarian A.C. at St. Mihiel. In particular, the attacks on Combres, supported by all the resources of the neighbouring fortress of Verdun, made the situation almost unendurable for our troops. Here they were clinging to the slope of the hill like swallows in their nests, so that a substantial improvement in their position was contemplated by means of an attack assisted by General Sontag's 3rd I.D. sent up to Conflans by Main Headquarters.

The incredible April weather, which turned all the roads into quagmires and filled all the trenches with water, forced upon friend and foe an involuntary temporary armistice, during which our men were equipped for further fighting and the urgently necessary reliefs were carried out. As early as the 20th April we had to repel renewed enemy attacks at Flirey, and on the 22nd at Ailly-Apremont, with heavy losses on both sides. Meanwhile the preparations for our attack against the flank and rear of the enemy, who dominated our communica-

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tions from the Combres hill, were completed with the co-operation of my G.S.O.1, Lieutenant-Colonel von Heymann, who had been sent there. On the 24th April the 5th A.C., under General von Oven, together with the 9th I.D. and the fresh 3rd I.D., which had been placed under his command, attacked on both sides of the Grande Tranchée de Calonne on the Côte. Several enemy positions south-west of Les Eparges and several thousand prisoners remained in our hands. The Hamburg, Hanover and Lower Silesian Regiments vied with one another in brilliant achievement in the wooded, broken country of the Côte. The success of the day was a gain of territory on the heights south-west of Les Eparges, which served to relieve our Combres position.

The plans of the Army detachment meanwhile went further. They held the enemy opposed to them to be so severely shaken in his powers of resistance, that they thought by pursuing the attack to throw him back to the front line of Verdun. For this fresh preparations were necessary. I was reluctant to give my consent, but yielded to General von Strantz's pressure. The attack took place on the 5th May, but with unusually heavy losses gained only very little ground. I was for a time at the battle headquarters of the Army Detachment in Hattonchâtel, on the Côte, without, indeed, being able to follow the course of the battle in the wooded country, over which no view could be obtained. I must admit that it was a mistake on my part not to persist in my refusal, especially when, as I learned later, General von Oven, to whom the direction of the attack was entrusted, had brought forward arguments against the undertaking without being able to convince his headquarters staff.

On the same day a splendid victory was achieved by the 80th Prussian Infantry Brigade, attached to the 3rd Bavarian A.C., under General Freiherr von Gebssattel, in Ailly Wood, south of Fort Camp des Romains, though part of the ground won here was subsequently lost again.

In this connection I will describe here, though it involves looking ahead a little, the further development of the fighting in which Strantz's Army Detachment took part during the summer months. The position at Combres became tolerable, as the enemy henceforward refrained from attacks on a large scale. On the other hand, the subterranean mine war assumed

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here, in time, as at Vauquois, unusually large proportions. With the help of sapper companies specially trained for this purpose we succeeded by numerous explosions and tunnellings in gradually pressing back the enemy on the hill an appreciable distance, and laying a chain of deep tunnels between the two opposing positions. Heavy attacks were made by the enemy at the end of July against the 9th and 13th I.D.'s, along the Grande Tranchée de Calonne, with the object of regaining the positions lost in April. The wood fighting, which swayed backwards and forwards, finally ended in quite minor losses of ground, but caused us heavy losses. The König's Grenadier Regiment alone lost some thirty officers and fourteen hundred men in its heroic defence. General Schwartz's 10th I.D., by a push forward on the hill immediately south-west of Les Eparges, then relieved the battle front on the Grande Tranchée. The 3rd Bavarian A.C. took part in no important undertakings, but hand-grenade fighting, particularly in Ailly Wood, kept this unit hard at it. On the south front of the army detachment the Priesterwald was repeatedly the scene of severe fighting. At the end of May General Wagner's 121st I.D. was attacked here by greatly superior strength, and lost some ground. On the 4th July this division, after thorough preparation, pierced the enemy position over a width of 1,500 m. to a depth of 3-4 km., and brought in rich booty in prisoners, guns and other war material. The fighting in the Priesterwald continued for some weeks more, but gradually the whole front of Strantz's Army Detachment lapsed into comparative calm.

### FIGHTING IN THE ARGONNE DURING THE SUMMER

Main Headquarters still remained in some doubt as to the necessity of such constant attacks, and ordered, amongst other things, that the Argonne fighting should be brought to an end by barring several of the lines running through the wood with heavy tree-trunks. They were to be defended from trenches further back, as the 8th E.D. in the Priesterwald actually tried to do. It turned out, however, that the enemy undermined these obstacles, blew up our trenches, and pushed forward so close to us that the men could never get any rest. Moreover, the other side, by their enormous expenditure of ammunition, which they could afford thanks to American supplies, were so



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superior to our artillery with its poor supply of ammunition, that only by offensive tactics on the part of our infantry could we relieve the almost intolerable battle conditions and inflict any appreciable losses upon the enemy. We were at a disadvantage when we allowed him the initiative; but when we ourselves assumed the offensive, and succeeded in imbuing the men with a feeling of initiative, the advantage was with us. Our battle tactics in the Argonne wood, therefore, where the French had to fear an attempt to cut them off from Verdun, forced the enemy continually to throw in strong forces, and caused him heavy losses. We remained masters of the situation. In this war of position, which was becoming more and more a war of material, this meant an invaluable moral gain. There were also sectors of the Western army where offensive tactics were entirely abandoned, so-called "quiet fronts." It was found in these places, when the situation became suddenly critical as a result of enemy attacks, that the previous quiet had had a soporific effect upon the men. That was, indeed, the most serious danger of the whole war of position, that it so easily tended to encourage the placing of one of the strongest sides of human nature, the instinct for self-protection, before duty.

On the 1st and 2nd May sections of the 27th and 34th I.D. in the Argonne successfully captured some strong points and trenches, taking several hundred prisoners. In the middle of the month came attacks in the area of the 18th R.C. for the "bird cage," a trench system north of Ville sur Tourbe. On the 25th May I observed from a tower in Consevoye Wood—in sight of Verdun Cathedral and several works and infantry positions—the firing of our 38.5 cm. naval guns placed in the wood between Vaudoncourt and Loison upon the enemy positions beyond the Meuse. It was owing to this effective flank fire that the enemy in that sector west of the Meuse showed no desire to attack. Further west, at the village of Vauquois, continually the scene of severe fighting, the French, after severe artillery preparation, attempted, on the 6th June, an attack with flame-throwers, which turned out a complete failure. This was soon afterwards replied to by the 27th I.D., in conjunction with the left wing of the 9th Landwehr Division, who stormed several successive enemy lines of defence on the western edge of the Argonne and brought in large captures of



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prisoners and material. An even finer success was achieved here on the 30th June by the 27th and 34th I.D.

Their deeds of heroism were specially memorialized on the 9th July in my presence by a ceremonial service of thanksgiving at Lancon, after which many iron crosses were awarded. The day was also spent in deep discussion, in which I took part, of the plans of attack of my third Argonne division, the 33rd I.D. On the 13th July, after several hours of artillery preparation north-west of Vienne le Château and south-west of Bourevilles, the ammunition having been obtained with difficulty from the *Feldmunitionschef*, brilliant success was achieved. The enemy hill position was stormed on a front of three km. and to a depth of one km., including the very important "La Fille Morte." The prisoners amounted to 70 officers and 3,700 men, as well as large quantities of war material. We did honour to our heroes at a service of thanksgiving in Borrieswald Camp.

Army Headquarters, where possible, enforced strict limitations on the planning of such individual tactical enterprises. Where an improvement in their position seemed necessary the initiative generally came from the troops. The revision of the plan lay with the higher command, which had, first and foremost, to decide whether the expected gain of ground meant a real improvement of position, and was proportionate to the inevitable sacrifice of life. In the organization and preparation of the attack we left subordinate officers great freedom, requiring only timely warning of their plans, so that arrangements could be made for providing support, or the scheme cancelled after examination by members of the operations staff. During the operation an officer of the General Staff was always present as intelligence officer, whose duty it was to watch events in the firing line and to furnish direct reports. Even if the troops did not perhaps always like the presence of these "spies" of the higher command, this rule, given the right choice of personalities, proved useful in dealing with possible sudden crises and making practical experience available for general use.

The good appearance of the prisoners, from the point of view of feeding and clothing, did not bear out our hopes and the ideas we had formed. We were, indeed, aware—after a year's occupation of their territory—that we were numerically

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inferior to the French; but we had to learn and take into consideration how lightly the war was pressing on France compared with the burden that the Germans had to bear.

South-west of the Bienne valley, which split the Argonne, and south of the railway and road Clermont en Argonnes-St. Menéhould, the French had all the support and comforts of their own native population and resources. We were in the central mountain country, with its foresters' roads rising steeply out of the Aire valley and its numerous deep-cut valleys and ravines, apart from all the difficulties and discomforts of a solitary wilderness, to which the inhabitants had given such characteristic names as "La Fille Morte," "Moulin de l'Homme mort," "Ruisseau des Meurissants," and so on. But in spite of all the advantages of his position, the enemy, with his powerful forces concentrated on the short Western front and so frequently relieved, was seldom able to withstand our attacks. To our four divisions, from the 9th Landwehr division to the 83rd I.D., on the Argonne front, were opposed, according to our calculations, nine and a half French divisions.

The task before our Argonne troops could only be achieved if the firm ties of close brotherhood in arms bound together all the branches of the service, infantry, artillery, pioneers and special units supporting one another loyally and confidently with death constantly before their eyes. The co-operation was exemplary. Military discipline, soldierly order, training and German comradeship were here manifested in their fullest significance. Otherwise all possibility of finding the way about the confusion of trenches, communication trenches and dug-outs, etc., all firm discipline, all hygiene, all possibility of carrying on through the winter would have been out of the question. Nowhere could I imagine more splendid relations of confidence between officers and subordinates. In close comradeship with their men, the leaders day and night heard the enemy shells roaring over the divisional and brigade staff dug-outs, and were daily in the trenches with the troops. A careful watch was kept that good spirits should predominate. Over one dug-out I read the sign, "Orderlies and Grooms' Rooms"; over another was written, "We built you through fear of a d—d hero's death." Seriousness of mind and religious feeling also appeared in names and inscriptions. A main communication trench was named "Paris Street,"

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and one dug-out bore the inscription, "Our God is a strong Tower." I compared the fresh, cheerful, earnest, unselfish spirit which was apparent on all sides with the most inspiring period of our national history, the wars of liberation. The sacred fire was kindled by the consciousness of our people that we were fighting a defensive war for our existence. Indeed, the soul of our fighting man was still pure and sensitive to ideals. What a spirit breathed out of these verses cut in the bark of a tree :

### "MY IRON CROSS

"My Iron Cross for courage that my Emperor gave to me,  
That is of all my earthly possessions the noblest thing I have.  
The Cross is my proudest ornament, my greatest pride.  
Perhaps another one is beckoning to me from the Argonne forest !  
Very well ! It is not everyone of us who brings it to his home.  
And yet the proud voice shouts : We are worthy of our fathers.  
"A. VANSELOW, 11-45."

### ALTERED TACTICS IN TRENCH WARFARE.

The long war of position forced us more and more to a thorough revision of the tactical views that we had inherited from peace-time about the use of the different branches of the service. The relentless development of the technical side in all its branches exerted a decisive influence. I will confine myself to indicating a few minor points.

The sphere of action of the infantry was limited to short-distance fighting. In this branch the value of individual personality came into prominence. In addition to the rifle and, in the hand of the marksman, the valuable telescopic rifle, the hand grenade took its place as an equal weapon, and was often mistakenly preferred. Many branches of the pioneer service, not only trench-digging, fell to the common lot of the infantry. The machine gun won a place of supreme importance. Not less fundamental were the changes in artillery tactics. Here the French were ahead. As in the war of movement, the enemy artillery, thanks to its excellent material and careful gunnery training, had made its devastating effect felt upon us, so in the war of position the enemy struck out new tactical lines along which we were compelled to follow. The so-called drum-fire, which was the culmination of concentrated artillery work with regard both to area and duration, was an invention of the French. The limitation of ammuni-

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tion under which we were still suffering, though to a less extent than before, made it difficult for us to repay him in his own coin, and prevented even our heavy artillery from making the most of their innate superiority, until the enemy, by great improvements in the number and efficiency of his own heavy artillery, wiped out our original long lead. But on our side, too, field and heavy artillery were continually increasing their co-ordination. The most widely varying types and calibres of guns were made to work smoothly together. Heavy mortars, used as mobile guns, changed their position over night as rapidly as if they were the arms of light cavalry. The pace in artillery science was set by the heavy artillery. Particular care was bestowed on the many-sided development of ground and air observation, every scientific invention being employed in the sphere of the intelligence and observation services.

I followed with amazed interest the inconceivably rapid and varied development of the new aerial arm, a development of which before the war we had never ventured to dream. The sphere of activity of the flying men was continually widening. To long-distance strategical and short-distance tactical reconnaissances were added scouting and observation work for the several arms, artillery and infantry, air-fighting in the most varied forms, either as single-handed fighting planes or in squadrons, bombing attacks, and later even the participation of the air-fighter alone and in echelon in the fighting on the ground. The ever increasing importance of the air-force gave rise on the other hand to an increase and development of defensive measures, a systematic organization of anti-aircraft apparatus.

A personal experience gave me the opportunity of appreciating the value of the flying service. On the 3rd June a concentrated air attack took place against my headquarters at Stenay. All our defensive measures were powerless to prevent the forty skilfully handled enemy machines in wave after wave of small squadrons from bombing the barracks, which was being used as a hospital, the market place, and, more especially, my headquarters with bombs, grenades and bundles of steel arrows. Although this surprise attack came in the early hours of the morning and there was plenty of cover to be found in cellars, Stenay unfortunately lost, through curiosity and foolhardiness, 7 dead and 21 wounded. Our



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reprisals came next day. We bombarded known enemy staff headquarters and Verdun itself with 38 cm. naval shells, which were visibly effective. After that we were spared such disturbances of our peace.

While the troops at the front applied themselves with enthusiasm, skill and success to adapting themselves to the new forms of fighting which the war of position made necessary, danger arose lest the training of the reserves at home should not give sufficient weight to the experiences of the war. From this point of view it was a welcome decision on the part of Main Headquarters to bring the training of the recruits, at least partially into direct touch with the troops in the field by establishing field recruit depots close behind the front and putting the training of the recruits more and more into the hands of the travelling staffs with travelling training personnel. This measure, which was gradually increased in scope, had, however, its dark side: the drafting away of so many energetic and efficient military brains and personalities from the home country had evil consequences. Many aged officers, no longer at the height of their physical and mental powers, with corresponding reserve and garrison troops remained at home, from whom the best elements were always thronging back to the front. Thus in the end the only men left under arms in the home barracks and on the parade-grounds were no longer of the kind whose discipline and educative spirit had traditionally diffused itself among the masses. Ideas born of stress but weak in nature, showing no understanding of the vast questions for which the war had begun and was being waged, gradually gained ground. Those who passed on their ideas were allowed to go their own way with a shake of the head but no good counsel.

### EVENTS ON OTHER FRONTS

While my Army Group were carrying out in the way sketched above its self-denying defensive task during the spring and summer months of 1915, the 6th Army of the Crown Prince of Bavaria was for a time faced with a much stiffer problem. Against them the English and French made a combined effort to break through on a large scale with strong forces, continually relieved, in the sector between Lille and Arras. At La Bassée, Fromelles and Neuve Chapelle, Loos, on the Loretto hill and at



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Souchez heavy fighting lasted for weeks. Finally, in spite of local defeats and occasional loss of territory, the Germans successfully beat off the enemy.

Meanwhile, events in the east were developing on an enormous scale. General von Falkenhayn, in view of the still critical situation of our allies, had determined upon a new offensive against the Russians on the Carpathian front in the middle of April and for this purpose strong forces under General von Mackensen were concentrated in the area between the upper Vistula and the foot of the Beskid Range. They broke through the Russian front on the 2nd May at Gorlice-Tarnow and in a rapid victorious advance cleared Galicia as far as the Dniestr-Wiznia-San line. Even Italy's declaration of war against Austria-Hungary at the end of May, involving as it did serious threatening of the Danube monarchy on a third front, was unable to cripple the energy with which the war was pursued in Galicia. On the 3rd June the fortress of Przemysl, and on the 22nd Lemberg fell into the hands of the allies.

These great strategic successes, materially increased by enormous captures of prisoners and masses of war-material, were followed up at the beginning of July by pressing forward the offensive from Galicia in a northerly direction towards Poland and in the middle of the month by Hindenburg's corresponding attack against the enemy's Narev front. On the 5th August Warsaw fell. In this way the operation originally aimed at limited objectives developed into an army movement on a tremendous scale with a final decision in view. The difficult problem to the theoretical solution of which we had already applied so much sagacity—the transition from the war of position to the war of movement—had found its practical solution. Almost the whole of the enemy's vast front was collapsing. Only the corner-stone facing East Prussia still held. This, too, began to totter with the fall of Kovno.

With feverish anxiety we followed the further development of events and racked our brains in heated disputes as to how the operations might best be pursued towards the longed for decision which would end the campaign. Would the master of retreats, for such the Russian, as always in military history, has once more proved himself to be, succeed by withdrawing into the immeasurable spaces of his hinterland in avoiding the bold strangle-hold on his throat? We were filled with admiration

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and confidence at the strength of nerve of the Chief of the General Staff, who daringly assumed the responsibility, not only of leaving the western front to look after itself for months at a time, but even of weakening it by transfers to the eastern front. But—would France and England look on inactive while the doom of their ally accomplished itself? Not one of us believed it. We were firmly convinced that a tornado exceeding in violence anything hitherto experienced would burst in the west and shake our living wall. We knew that when that happened we should have to rely on ourselves alone. Whatever were the natural anxieties which crept into our minds at this prospect no one of my operations staff was so pusillanimous as to wish for a premature cessation of the victorious progress of the German arms in the east for the sake of increased security in the west.

### INCREASED TENSION IN THE WEST

August, 1915, ran its course in the west in unusual tranquillity. The Army detachments of Falkenhausen and Gaede were again placed under my command with the difficult task of setting about the desired recovery of the Sundgau, west of Mülhausen, then in French hands. On the Alsatian Vosges front the enemy held the whole line of hill positions. The clearance of this German territory was therefore necessarily a hard nut to crack, in view of the fact that of the 80 German Army Corps, 34 were in the east, and of the 46 corps in the west only 7 complete divisions were at the disposal of Main Headquarters as movable reserves. Of these, only a small and diminishing number could be assigned to the extreme left wing. Subsequently, there was no further question of the tedious and difficult task of winning back the Vosges, but only of the preparation of an attack resting on the Swiss frontier in the direction of Belfort which might later be extended northwards, if the enemy trench line in the Belfort hollow should be broken through. These plans, to say nothing of their fulfilment, never matured.

Our continuous endeavours to make the short rest of units withdrawn from the line a bright contrast, refreshing to mind and body, to the life of hardship in the narrow trenches culminated in a football contest, lasting several days, between the divisions of my army at its headquarters in Stenay, from which the 3rd Bavarian A.C. emerged victorious.

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The anniversary of the battle of Longwy I spent in the circle of the whole officer corps of my Army headquarters, when I was surprised by a cordial telegram from his Majesty and the award of the order *Pour le mérite*. The feelings by which I was moved I expressed in the following order of the day:

“The gracious words of recognition with which his Majesty the Emperor and King in the imperial cabinet order of the 22nd August has awarded me the order *Pour le mérite* are fixed in all our memories. It gives me joyous satisfaction to express to my army that I regard this high distinction as a recognition of its achievements and to thank each individual man.

“It fills me with constant pride to stand at the head of such troops. It is my daily wish to lead them on to fresh achievement. I cherish the firm conviction that in the future my army will carry through with the same success as heretofore any task that may be allotted to it by our supreme war-lord.”

This Order of the Day indicated the severe trials which, in view of the assiduous preparations for an attack of the French on the Champagne front from the edge of the Argonne westwards, there was no doubt we had to face. In the wooded area itself Würtemberg and Lorraine regiments, by the capture of enemy positions and strong points like the “Marie Thérèse” works on the 8th September, gave fresh proof of their fighting spirit. On the 10th September, the Commander-in-Chief of the 3rd Army on the right flank, Generaloberst von Einem, discussed personally with me the critical situation on his front. He, too, had the impression that a powerful enemy offensive was imminent. Similar reports were received from the front of Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria’s 6th Army. Under these circumstances, we looked expectantly to the east, whither almost all our reserves had been sent to crush the Russians. Just at that time, Hindenburg’s new offensive on and across the Vilna was in full swing. Gradually, however, we had grown sceptical as to the issue. So much at least was certain: we had achieved vast, though only frontal victories in the wide spaces of the east, but we had been able neither to cut communications in the rear nor to close the pincers early enough to surround the retreating Russian hordes. In view of this not entirely satisfactory course of events in the east and the imminence of the dangers threatening us in the west and the Balkans,

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it was now necessary to break off in Russia. Main Headquarters had ordered in time the withdrawal of considerable forces, first for the Hungarian Banat and then for the western front.

Our interest in the extensive operations in the open field which were brewing in the Balkans, and for which Bulgaria's joining the Central Powers opened up encouraging prospects, had soon to give way before the nearer anxieties to which the Franco-English offensive preparations in Champagne and Artois gave rise. From the 22nd to the 25th September, his Majesty inspected troops taken out of the line to rest in the area of my Army Group in Alsace, then between the Meuse and the Moselle, and finally with the 5th Army. During these days the drum-fire against the 6th and 3rd Armies, as well as my front west of the Argonne, was already so terrific that there could no longer be any doubt that the long foreseen Anglo-French grand scale offensive was opening.

### BEGINNING OF THE AUTUMN BATTLE IN CHAMPAGNE

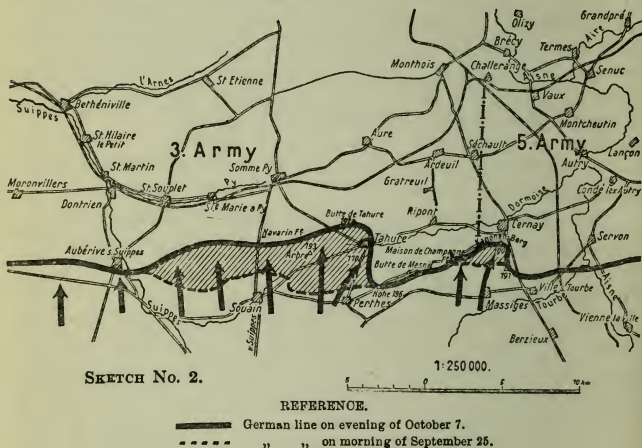
On the 25th September the infantry storming attacks were already in full swing. The 3rd Army had suffered particularly heavy losses in men, material and ground through the powerful artillery bombardment and use of gas shells. In the area of General Fleck's 8th R.C., whose line joined the right wing of the 5th Army, the troops in the front line were in an extremely difficult position, with no possibility of immediately filling with reserves the gaps that had been torn in their line. In general the 3rd Army were meanwhile able to hold the rear lines of the 8th R.C. In the evening it was by no means certain whether, in the particularly severe struggle at Massiges and on the Kanonenberg (hill 199) east of Maison de Champagne, touch had been maintained between my right wing, the 21st R.D. of the 18th R.C., and Ditfurth's Division of the 8th R.C.

At the juncture of the two armies the special need for caution called for special measures. It was necessary to make absolutely certain of holding the Kanonenberg which dominated the position. The French, by means of a wedge driven into our line at about this point, were able to drive us out of our hill position north-east of Massiges and, moreover, seriously threaten the artillery of the 18th R.C. The power of this



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corps and the adjoining 16th A.C. in the Argonne to hold their ground depended entirely on the 3rd Army's left wing standing firm. I tried personally to induce the Corps Staffs concerned to concentrate attention on the juncture of the two armies. In this I had to overcome considerable opposition from the Corps Staff of the 8th R.C., whose commanding officer, under the immediate influence of the reports he had just received about heavy losses of men and ground, was intending to withdraw the defence behind the Dormoise, which, having regard to the position of my left wing, was not practicable. My



earnest representations and orders over the telephone succeeded in inducing him to abandon this idea. This incident, from a psychological point of view, has always remained in my mind as proof of how, in moments when even the steel-tempered nerves of a general give way, if only for a short time, everything depends on whether the higher command, uninfluenced by local events and impressions, can enforce its will relentlessly and at the right time. It was fortunate that the telephone placed me in a position to avert incalculable disaster by immediate intervention. In this I do not take any credit to myself. The only thing that made the matter difficult was that this general was not under my command.



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In holding the position on the right wing of the 18th R.C. the young Captain von Ilseman distinguished himself by his circumspection and cool-headedness. He joined my Army Headquarters Staff later as general staff officer, from which post he was appointed to Main Headquarters; afterwards the Emperor made him his aide-de-camp. With him he went to Holland in November, 1918.

On the 26th September the intention of the enemy's attacking with fresh troops and enormous supplies of ammunition became clear. His attempts to break through with a view to realizing far-reaching strategic plans took the form, in Champagne, of desperate efforts against the Argonne front, through Somme Py to St. Souplet. The intelligence service thought they could identify twenty-five French divisions opposed to the 18th R.C. of the 5th Army, the three divisions of the 8th R.C. and the 24th R.D. of the 12th R.C. Long-range artillery and bombing by aeroplanes caused serious havoc to the traffic behind our lines and to road and railway communications.

The essential unity of command was established in the forenoon of the 26th September, when his Majesty added the 3rd Army to my command. Main Headquarters sent up all available reserves from behind the Western Front, including the 5th and 56th I.D., a few mixed Landwehr brigades, and finally the 10th A.C., which had come from the East. About noon on the 26th the position of the 8th R.C. had become considerably more critical. The general in command again mooted the idea of withdrawing the defence. I sent my Chief of Staff to the headquarters of the Corps Staff. It was due to his very firm intervention that the possession of the hill line Maison de Champagne-Kanonenberg was established as unconditionally essential. As so often before, flagging confidence was here again stiffened by a categorical imperative from the side of authority. The fresh commanding officers of the newly-arriving reserves exerted a similar influence on the cohesion of the front lines. By successful minor counter-attacks and their personal appearance at the head of their troops, they restored confidence and firmness to the front line which was overstrained and exhausted, the trenches being reduced almost to a slag heap.

When, early on the 27th September, we were still unable

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to find out with any certainty who was in possession of the Kanonenberg, I sent my personal adjutant, Major von Müller, and Captain von Behr, of my personal staff, to the battlefield. They had instructions to discover the exact situation of Ditzfurth's division south-west of Gratreuil—actually touch had been established between the wings of the two armies on the Kanonenberg, which was in the hands of the division. The enemy lay 50 metres from our firing-line. Moreover, this division, thanks to the reserves to whom on their way up had been entrusted the difficult but vital task of holding the position, was in firm possession of the hill line.

From the battle position of General von Engelbrechten's 50th I.D. on Hill 189, north-east of Aure, the two officers obtained a good view over the whole battlefield of the 8th R.C. The heights between Arbres (193 west of Tahure) and Massiges were a veritable hell of fire, smoke, fog and dust, so that the defence of the brave troops, carried out under an unimagined hail of steel, was worthy of the greatest admiration.

### VICTORIOUS REPULSE OF THE FRENCH ATTACKS ON CHAMPAGNE

After the reserves had been sent up, a corps was formed of what had hitherto been Liebert's Division and the 5th I.D., with which it had been strengthened, under the command of General von Lüttwitz, while the 8th R.C. absorbed the 50th I.D., Ditzfurth's and the newly-added 56th I.D. of General Sontag. In this formation the heroic courage of all the troops taking part successfully held up the enemy's desperate attempts to break through during all the following days without any appreciable loss of ground. The danger of the heights dominating the south valley of the Dormoise, especially the Kanonenberg, falling into enemy hands was averted. The incomparable achievements of the Rheinländer of Ditzfurth's Division in this area and the Brandenburg Leibgrenadiers and the Prinz-Heinrich Fusiliers built the firm foundation upon which the higher command could base their decisions for the further prosecution of the battle. In this respect, too, General von Steuben, commanding the 18th R.C., by his own determination, was particularly helpful in bringing to a successful conclusion the heavy fighting in which my army was engaged west of the

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Argonne. He was deservedly rewarded on the 11th October with the order *Pour le mérite*. My brother Oscar, also, as brigade-commander of his brave Hamburg regiments, played a meritorious part in stopping the enemy break-through. He and his troops miraculously escaped a terrible explosion in the Somme Py tunnel, which unfortunately cost many lives.

The calm, firm handling of the reins by my Chief of Staff from Army Headquarters guaranteed the sure, smooth functioning of the complicated machinery for transmitting orders and receiving reports. The co-operation with the subordinate Army staff of the 3rd Army, which in the determined personality of Colonel von Lossberg had a brilliant chief of staff, was carried on without friction. Under the circumstances I was able, with a quiet mind, following my own inclination, to devote myself to what I regarded as my special task of exerting my personal influence with the troops and keeping in touch and conversing with the subordinate staffs. Thus, during these exciting days I went about much. As I felt it well to encourage the troops by my presence and conversation from the lowest ranks upwards, I gained new confidence by direct touch with our incomparable men. Yes, the men were really incomparable! The common achievement of the German infantry in particular in the Champagne autumn battle of 1915 cannot be more truly and stirringly expressed than in the words of the following poem, written at the time by a young General Staff Officer at Main Headquarters, Captain von Wallenberg:

### THE GERMAN INFANTRY

" On a sandy hill at the forest's edge  
Stands a wooden shelter  
Half hidden in the shade of the pines,  
Thickly covered with earth and grass.

Within, between the two supports,  
Men sit writing at the telephone,  
And over maps and paper  
The general staff officer pores,  
Draws and measures with an absorbed look,  
He is lost to all else.

But outside in the sunshine  
Stands the leader, the general,  
Cap and cloak a little tattered,  
His teeth tight closed,  
Upright, with fist clenched;  
Iron-grey his hair, but his eyes still young,  
Which with steely confidence  
Gaze down into the depths!

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- “ Below him on the mountain slope  
There is a crash of fire along the whole front—  
Bursting shells flash,  
Iron and earth are blown on high ;  
Poisonous clouds, yellow and green,  
Creep over the ground.  
For days these have hidden the life  
That is lived down there in the firing trenches.  
In the trenches of Somme Py  
Lies the German infantry ;  
Has lain for days unflinching  
Among dying men and corpses.  
Nothing to be seen but pain and stress,  
Nothing to eat but hard bread ;  
A little water from dirty pannikins.  
For this the thin hands reach out ;  
Unprotected in wind and storm,  
Almost shot to pieces,  
Under the green volumes of smoke  
Lost to sight for days.
- “ But still in the sunshine  
The general stands and waits,  
Sees the flashes, the quivering flames,  
Clenches his teeth still tighter ;  
Never turns aside his gaze of steel  
From the titanic spectacle ;  
A will of iron, cool of blood,  
And yet a heart so large, so large !  
Silently an officer approaches :  
‘ An enquiry from Headquarters  
Has come over the telephone :  
Will the division hold ? ’  
And the old man with earnest face  
Turns quietly and speaks :  
‘ Give merely the answer :  
They will hold while life lasts ! ’
- “ In the evening, at sunset,  
Men read at home by the fireside :  
‘ The Palace of Belgrade  
Was entered by a German battalion ;  
Five attacks at Somme Py  
Repulsed by our infantry.’  
History tells  
Of many brave men and heroes,  
We read in childhood in rhythmic phrases  
How the Greeks and Romans died,  
Winning fame and honour.
- “ But nowhere was there achievement  
To equal that of the German infantry !  
They know no outward honour,  
They know only harsh duty.  
Stern of eye, white of cheek,  
They went silently to death.  
Where the body of the father moulders  
The son follows without a word.  
Simple and brave, late and early,  
Undaunted in storm and stress,  
Beloved German infantry,  
May God protect you ! ”

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Our defence, every day more perfectly organized, met the French waves of attack with most effective artillery fire. Though some isolated French shock-troops occasionally broke through, they were for the most part wiped out at close quarters or captured. Generalissimo Joffre fed his regiments, weakened by heavy losses, by throwing in continually more and more fresh troops; hecatombs were sacrificed to the victory expected with such certainty. How surely our brave enemy had counted on the success of his attempted break-through is shown by the fact that in one place large masses of cavalry charged the thinned line of our infantry. They collapsed completely under our fire. In this the 30th Reserve Infantry Regiment, with which Captain Anker, afterwards my Intelligence Officer, fought, specially distinguished itself.

On the 29th September the struggle reached its apogee behind heaps of French corpses, then the scales of fortune dropped on the German side.

The fact that in the stress of the hand-to-hand struggle, loss of ground, even at important points, could not be avoided, in no way affected the general result. On the 30th, in spite of the bravest resistance, the hotly contested Hill 191, north of Massiges, fell to the enemy. From lack of reserves in a fit condition to carry out a counter-attack which promised chances of success, the front had to be consolidated in a suitable intermediate position, resting on the Kanonenberg (Hill 199). But on the whole, the situation improved from day to day as the systematic relief of the exhausted troops and the establishment of greater depth in the defensive system was made possible with the help of brave (labour) units working under the enemy's long-range fire. The use of strong fighting squadrons from the various aerodromes of Champagne produced more favourable conditions and freer activity for reconnaissance, air observation and fire direction.

On the 3rd October I was able to report with confidence to my imperial father, during an interview at Stenay, that the general situation of the armies would enable them to prove equal to a fresh enemy attack on a large scale. We had not to wait long for this. The 6th October developed into a further day of large scale fighting, beginning with a tremendous enemy artillery bombardment. His infantry, which then advanced under the influence of strong potations of alcohol,



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made still another breach in our front. The Butte de Tahure, with the excellent observation post 192 and the village of Tahure, was lost. Further back, however, the safe consolidation of our front was completed almost automatically. Fresh reserves came up, including some from the 5th Army, so that by admirable work on the part of the general staffs and troops a great German counter-attack in both areas and as far as Hill 170 south of Tahure was carried out on the 9th October. It did not indeed attain its full objective, but strengthened the unswerving determination of the troops to hold their ground, and, above all, gave us back the vital observation position on Hill 192, at the Butte de Tahure.

This termination of the battle was so far decisive that in a conversation between General von Falkenhayn and the Chiefs of Staff of the 3rd and 5th Armies on the 10th October, it was decided, instead of offensive operations, to complete the defence preparations against further heavy attacks from the enemy with all the means at our disposal. The reliefs which were then in progress offered the welcome opportunity of establishing and equipping army reserves behind the front. The systematic bombardment of the enemy batteries, which were continually being carefully and reliably identified, was further perfected as a most effective defensive measure. Like a thunderstorm rumbling in the distance the autumn battle lay behind us. It had extorted very heavy sacrifices, but had also brought unfading laurels and most valuable experience.

### ANOTHER LULL IN THE WEST

In the Balkans, German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian forces, with splendid co-operation and under the greatest geographical and climatic difficulties imaginable, were smashing the Serbian army almost to complete annihilation, and at last opening the road to hard-pressed Turkey. On the ever-moving battlefield of upper Italy the 3rd and 4th Isonzo battles were raging. But in the western theatre of war—as before in the east—after the failure of the enemy attempts to break through in Champagne and at Arras, a complete lull set in from the middle of October which was only occasionally interrupted by local enterprises. Apart from the obvious exhaustion of the French and English armies, the inclemency

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of the weather, weeks of pouring rain, helped to bring this about. We stood therefore almost incredulous before the news of an imminent reopening of the Champagne offensive. However, everything was done to be prepared for it.

By visits to the 3rd Army and my troops in the Argonne, I convinced myself that the consolidation of positions was making good progress. Behind the first and second line a third was being prepared. With the artillery also every measure of defence against a new heavy attack had been seen to. One of these visits especially sticks in my memory. It was on 23rd November to the 27th I.D. in the Argonne. The road of approach led from Senuc, on the western edge of the wood, through Lancon, to the small station of "Hindenburg Mill" on the Argonne railway, the terminus of which, the picturesquely situated "Dead Man Mill," was 2 kilometres east of Binarville. From there a deep-cut approach trench of the 124th Infantry Regiment led in the direction of the Ferme aux Charmes, through fighting trenches to the "Crown Prince Fort" 200 m. behind the first line, a model of field fortification near to the enemy. A completely self-contained strong-point, it was surrounded by a barbed wire entanglement 50 m. thick, was garrisoned by a company at war strength and was provided with many concrete shelters and living rooms 4 or 5 m. below the ground, which still bore vegetation. The field of fire to the front and on the flanks ran to 800 m. in clear weather. In the frequent fogs, special liaison posts helped to give security. Moreover, fog was an advantage to the troops, since it limited firing activity to such an extent that with a little caution it was possible to move about outside the trenches. My Württembergers, members of the 123rd and 124th Regiments, made an excellent impression and, as always, gave frank expression to their delight at my visit. The exceptionally beautiful and peacefully situated woodland cemetery of the 123rd Grenadier Regiment in its simple but impressive arrangement and its evergreen colouring left an indelible impression on all visitors and could scarcely have had its equal in the world. The sanitary and fighting conditions on the "Dead Man Mill" and the ordnance depots at the "Hindenburg Mill" confirmed one's conviction that the hard lot of our soldiers at the front in the wearying trench war had been very considerably modified in preparation for the early winter as

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regards accommodation, safety, and provision of roads and communications.

Though there was really no time for hibernation the war-machine rolled smoothly on. Even the gas given to the world by M. Turpin, and the effect of which had already been demonstrated to us by the English lyddite shells and the flame-throwers, borrowed from fortress warfare, were more seldom active in the inclement winter weather. Thus I was able at the beginning of December to take fourteen days' leave, and even to ignore the persecution of the Northcliffe Press in Berlin.

On my return to Stenay winter calm reigned. The troops, however, were suffering from serious floods and were to some extent compelled to abandon their trenches. Fortunately the enemy was faring no better. All the numerous and efficient pumping appliances failed against the force of this element. As a timely additional security, strong reserves appeared from the Serbian theatre of war after working behind our front and made possible a reorganization of the forces. On the right wing of my army, the 18th R.C. was reunited by exchanging the 27th I.D. for the 25th R.D. The Württembergers, together with their sister division the 26th, from whom they had long been separated, were transferred to the 4th Army in Flanders, under their 13th Army Head Quarters Staff. I expressed my gratitude to this specially distinguished unit in the following order of the day of the 15th December :

### TO THE 27TH I.D

The unexpected order for the separation of the 27th I.D. from my 5th Army has touched me most painfully. To suppress my personal feelings in complying with the higher intentions of Main Head Quarters is a hard military duty.

For fifteen months my beloved 27th I.D. has fought and lived with me through good and evil days. Wherever they were ordered to go I could always rely absolutely on the Württembergers ; Longwy, the Meuse Crossing, Varennes, Vauquois, Kanonenberg and the Argonne, these are the names which blaze in the history of the part you have taken in the Great World War, 1914-15.

The noblest and best of your works, however, has been performed in the severe uninterrupted struggle in the Argonne

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forest. Twice have the leaves fallen from the trees and still you fought your way forward, step by step, with your comrades of the 16th A.C., always cheerfully ready for fresh enterprises, exemplary in the consolidation of the positions you won. Twice have we listened together to the Christmas bells in the Argonne, and gratefully and in silence our thoughts have gone out to our departed comrades who have found such solemn resting-places in the woodland cemetery. I had hoped that we should be together until the end of the war. Now I must let you go, but with a heavy heart.

May my farewell to you be one of gratitude. For your loyal bravery and your never-flagging cheerfulness may God protect you on your new way and lead you in time, crowned with victory, to your homes. Think, however, at times of your Army Commander.

WILLIAM,

Crown Prince of the German Empire and of Prussia.

With a similar order of the day I also took leave of the Bavarian troops of the 2nd Landwehr division who were leaving the Army in which they had done full honour to the Bavarian reputation in war at Eton, Montfaucon, Vauquois and Avocourt. In this long war I could only accustom myself slowly to such partings because the troops of every German race in their individual way won my heart, and because their achievements were so splendid. Thus a farewell became still harder at times when special work might be required of my front as at this particular moment when large transfers of troops to the Western Front were in progress.





**PART II**  
**THE BATTLES FOR VERDUN, 1916**



## CHAPTER VI

### THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE OFFENSIVE AND THE FIRST ASSAULT, FEBRUARY, 1916.

#### THE DECISION TO ATTACK AT VERDUN

ABOUT the middle of December, 1915, the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Armies gave me a clear and timely exposition of the general military and political situation and his ideas as to probable future developments. General von Falkenhayn considered that he was in a position to meet any possible enemy attack wherever delivered, as he had in hand an adequate number of reserve divisions, ample stocks of munitions and material and sufficient resources in manpower; and the questions of equipment, supply and finance could by an exercise of reasonable economy be easily dealt with. In the East, owing to the limited military value of the Austro-Hungarian Army, we had not been able to bring Russia to a frame of mind in which peace overtures could successfully be opened; but we had, principally by our own efforts, weakened her military power to such an extent that she was no longer a menace to us, and was indeed herself in some danger of internal collapse. The Serbian Army had, with the co-operation of Bulgaria, been destroyed, and thus had been opened a direct route to Turkey, who was still heroically maintaining the defence of the Dardanelles. The Franco-British offensive in this quarter was no longer a menace now that it had been weakened by an unsuccessful diversion of troops to aid Serbia. Italy also was held in check by the Austrian Army, now freed from all preoccupations in other theatres of war. This did not prevent Austria, who had never hitherto sent any troops to assist us in our struggle against France, Italy and Belgium, from demanding German reinforcements to co-operate with her against her only remaining enemy. The attitude of

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Roumania, governed, as it was, by the swaying balance of success on either side, was now markedly pro-German, so much so that we were able to make contracts for supplies. Greece's neutrality was also for the present assured.

In a word, we were now once more in a position to devote all our attention to the main theatre of war, subject, of course, to the necessity of leaving important forces to secure our Eastern front. In this main theatre England, holding as she did the economic whip hand of France, had held the latter to her task with the promise that Germany must shortly be brought to her knees by the blockade alone, and that a corresponding strength must thereby accrue to the Entente.

The recent changes in the French Government and the High Command, however, did not seem to point to any such prospect, but rather to a serious internal weakness. It was permissible to hope that a decisive blow in the West would convince the Entente of the uselessness of further efforts and hasten the disruption of an alliance which was no longer as close as it had been.

The date and place of the proposed offensive on the Western front were not disclosed to me for the present. The immediate initiation of unrestrained submarine warfare was also planned, so as to interrupt all overseas traffic with England, even at the risk of bringing America into the war !

This latter decision was highly satisfactory to me, for I had long regarded the fullest employment of our submarine weapon as the only effective reply to England's starvation blockade.

For the rest, however, I returned from Great Headquarters to Stenay with mixed feelings. The novelty and warmth of Falkenhayn's expression of opinion had something uncommonly attractive about it ; it was clear that he himself was thoroughly convinced of the justness of his own views, and that he had the fullest confidence in his star. Yet I myself regarded the conclusions, which to him seemed so inevitable, with no little mistrust, for my own view of the varying problems of this war on several fronts was very different from his. Realizing, of course, that the ultimate decision of the war must be sought in the West, I did not believe that the time was yet ripe for it, until we had gained a greater measure of security for our rear by further victories in the East.

Despite our successful offensive of 1915 we were still com-

## The Preparations for the Offensive

pelled to detach forces to the support of all our Allies ; we still had large masses of troops tied down to the defensive in the East ; we had still to guard against possible surprises from new or resurrected enemies, and of all our many foes only the smallest, Serbia, had been finally put out of action.

We were thus in a position to employ only half our strength against England and her vassal powers in the West ; and this England meant to win at any cost, and was prepared to expend for this end, not only her own Kitchener armies, but the armed might of the whole world !

My Chief of Staff had many talks with me over all this, and did his best to dispel my doubts and fears. He, as well as the other Army leaders, had received instructions from Falkenhayn to draw up offensive projects for their respective sectors. So far as we were concerned, after considerable discussion we confined our considerations to two points, Verdun and Belfort, and finally excluded the latter on account of the afore-mentioned limitation of scope of any offensive by the Vosges and the Swiss frontier, and the difficulties and dangers of massing strong forces on our extreme left flank and denuding the rest of our long front. Therefore there only remained Verdun. The strategic value of this corner-stone of the enemy's line as a sally-port for an offensive against our vital rearward communications had often been emphasized, and I was most anxious to put an end once for all to this ever-present menace by securing possession of the fortress. A complete breakthrough and a resultant initiation of open warfare formed no part of my plans. Our projected offensive was not to assume the form of a strategic envelopment, as the High Command had demanded in December, 1914, when it was proposed to attack with our extreme right wing by way of the Argonne and with the Army Detachment under Von Strantz across the Meuse by St. Mihiel, but involved a simultaneous offensive from north to south on both banks of the Meuse with forces disposed in great depths, so as to be in a position to meet any hostile flanking movement and to deliver enveloping attacks if opportunity offered.

General von Falkenhayn, in a conference with my Chief of Staff in Berlin, resolved to adopt our proposals for the offensive against Verdun. I do not believe that he was in any way induced to arrive at this decision by pressure on the part of



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General von Knobelsdorf; it was too much in correspondence with his own general trend of thought, which felt no inclination for a large scale strategic break-through, with a view to forcing a decision, but preferred a limited offensive with assured prospects of success. On one detail of the projected plan of attack Falkenhayn and Knobelsdorf from the first disagreed. The former considered that he had not at his disposal sufficient troops to furnish adequate reserves for an offensive on both banks of the Meuse, or sufficient artillery to prepare and cover it, in view of the need for guarding against an Allied attack on some other front. We insisted that Verdun was the corner-stone of the Western front, and that it was a matter of honour for France to retain it, and that therefore nothing less than an attack on a broad front could prevail against the forces that the enemy would certainly utilize for its defence. Von Falkenhayn concurred in this view so far as the French were concerned, but feared that the British might attempt some diversion elsewhere, to deal with which he must keep some divisions in hand. Such action on the part of the British appeared to us at the moment as unlikely, as the organization of their new armies was still in course of completion. All our protests were in vain. Before Christmas we had, in strict secrecy, been given verbal orders by the High Command that the hostile positions north of Verdun on the right bank of the Meuse were to be the objectives of our attack, and that preparations to this end were to be taken in hand.

My long-suppressed eagerness to lead my tried and trusted troops once more to battle against the enemy was now to be gratified. I was filled with happy anticipations; yet I could not regard the future with a confidence altogether serene. I was disquieted by the constantly repeated expression used by the Chief of the General Staff that the French Army must be "bled white" at Verdun, and by a doubt as to whether the fortress could, after all, be taken by such means. I could only conclude that there lay before us a long and difficult struggle, which must place the utmost strain on the endurance of the troops; [indeed, the limitation of the offensive to the right bank of the Meuse seemed to be motivated by a desire to engage as few troops as possible in the first stages, so as to ensure a continuous feeding of the front of attack over a long period of fighting.]

# The Preparations for the Offensive

## THE PLAN OF ATTACK

I was, on the other hand, in complete agreement with my Chief of the General Staff, that every effort must be made to bring about the rapid fall of Verdun and so avoid the continuous expenditure of forces inevitable in a lengthy battle of material. If we were not to be permitted to carry out the offensive on the scale that seemed to us most likely to ensure success, we could at least see to it that there should be immediately available in rear of the narrow front of attack sufficient reserves to exploit any initial success to the fullest. Our first project of January 4th, 1916, therefore had in constant view the need for rapidity and speed. It was pointed out that, in view of our experiences in dealing with the Belgian, French and Russian fortresses, our best hope of success lay in the annihilating effect of our heavy and siege artillery. These hopes were certainly not fulfilled to the same extent as regards Verdun. The fate of the fortress would be sealed if we could succeed by a surprise attack with superior forces, and covered by a powerful mass of guns, in pushing rapidly forward as far as the commanding north-eastern slopes of the Côtes de Meuse and getting possession of the forts crowning them. "Once the eastern bank is in our hands"—so ran the wording of the project—"we can reduce the field works and permanent forts on the western side by flanking fire; and even if we cannot actually secure possession of these fortifications, the value of the fortress to France will have disappeared by reason of the loss of the eastern banks."

In order to facilitate the task before the main offensive, a simultaneous attack against the south-eastern side of the fortress by the Army Detachment Strantz from the line Combles-Mouilly was discussed; but the idea was abandoned in view of the difficulties afforded by the wooded country, of which the fighting of April and May, 1915, on the 5th Corps front had left us with vivid recollections, and in view of the possibility of the attack being taken in flank from the western bank of the river. Instead, an advance of the Army Detachment due westwards towards the Meuse was proposed, to take place as soon as the line of forts Haudainville and Haudiomont had

## My War Experiences

been secured by the northern attack and the Woivre plain to the east had been cleared of the enemy.

We considered that the success of the offensive should have, not only a tactical and moral effect in depriving France of her strongest fortress, but should also secure a permanent improvement of our strategic situation in the west. It was advisable, therefore, to endeavour to secure, not only a favourable jumping-off ground for further continuance of the operations in the sector of the Meuse, but also a line that could be held with the minimum possible number of troops, so as to permit of an offensive being undertaken elsewhere if deemed advisable. It was therefore recommended that the operations at Verdun should be gradually extended to include the occupation of the line from Four de Paris in the Argonne by Aubreville to Landrecourt on the west bank, and on the east bank of the Côtes de Meuse from Fort d'Haudainville to St. Mihiel—a considerably shorter front than that held by us at the time. It was made as clear as was permissible by the orders issued to us that we considered that the situation could only be met by an offensive on both banks of the Meuse.

Five Army Corps were estimated to be necessary for the offensive on the eastern bank. Of these three were allotted to the northern attack; a fourth, reinforced by some of the units already in line, was to advance in the Woivre plain north-west of Etain, against the Côtes de Meuse, as soon as the enemy's first positions on the heights were in our hands, and the fifth corps was to co-operate in this advance on the front of the Army Detachment Strantz, south-east of Etain. The 6th Reserve Corps, west of the river, was meanwhile to bring the flanking fire of its artillery to bear on the main front to be attacked and to neutralize any hostile batteries who might be holding up our advance by cross-fire from the western bank. It was laid down, however, that the reinforcement of the 6th Reserve Corps by a second corps might be advisable in order to gain possession of the enemy's forward zone of defence on this bank should circumstances demand.

The leading principles which formed the basis of this project of attack had, before being placed on paper, been exhaustively discussed with and received the approval of the High Command at General Headquarters.

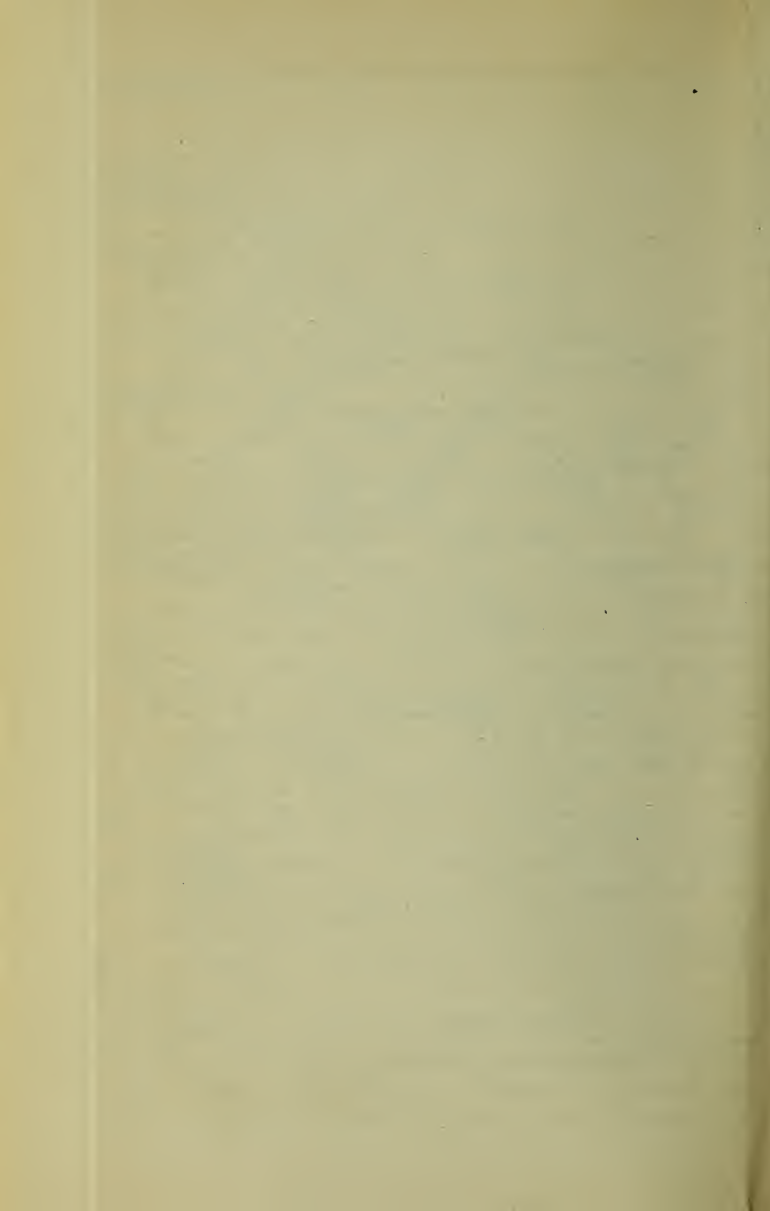
The first of the new formations to arrive was the 7th Reserve



# GENERAL MAP OF THE ATTACK ON VERDUN.

MAP 4.







## The Preparations for the Offensive

Corps, under General von Zwehl, which was secretly brought up from Valenciennes to the area in rear of the 77th Brigade and the 10th Reserve Division of the 5th Reserve Corps on the line Consenvoye-Flabas. I visited the newly-arrived commander at his headquarters at the Château de Louppy on December 27th, and that same evening entertained my Generals Commanding and their Chiefs of Staff to dinner. On December 29th I was inspecting the front of the 6th Reserve Corps from the observatory of Montfaucon, and from this magnificent view-point my eyes first sought out, not the Argonne forest at my feet, as they had been wont to do hitherto, but the eastern bank of the Meuse, where, behind the hills of Horgne, Morimont and Komagne, such fateful matters were in preparation. One by one there now arrived the other corps destined to take part in the assault, the 18th, 3rd and 15th Corps.

Surprise was an essential condition of success, and therefore haste was urgently necessary. The curtain of the mists of winter and the shelter of every muddy plateau and broad valley had to be utilized for the concealment of our preparations, and much-needed work on roads, shelters and screens had reluctantly to be left undone for want of time. A regular siege on the usual lines would have lasted for months, and, in view of the fact that the southern front of the fortress remained open, could not serve any useful purpose; we had recourse, therefore, to the method of blowing a deep breach in the hostile lines by a sudden blast of fire from artillery concentrated against a narrow front, and then throwing in strong bodies of infantry to penetrate the gap thus made and roll up the enemy on either flank. The front to be assaulted between the Meuse and Ornes was therefore divided into three corps sectors: "A," allotted to the 7th Reserve Corps, included Haumont wood and the two ridges running south-westwards from it. General von Schenck's 18th Corps, assembled in the area Flabas-Ville-devant-Chaumont, was to operate in sector "B," which extended from Caures wood to the Ville valley, its general axis of direction on hills 344 and 326. To the 3rd Corps, under General von Lochow, was assigned sector "C" as far as the Azannes-Ornes road, and this formation was ordered to occupy the Ville and Wawrille woods, keeping clear of the valleys, which were effectively commanded by hostile artillery. The 7th Reserve and 3rd Corps were then to consolidate on the general

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line Haumont-Beaumont-Wawrille and, wheeling to right and left, to roll up the enemy front in the general direction of Brabant and Ornes.

The attack of these three Corps on the Meuse heights was to be followed, if successful, by the subsidiary operations of the 15th Corps, under General von Deimling, in sector "D" in the Woevre; this corps, supported by parts of the 5th Reserve Corps, was to advance against the enemy positions on the line Maucourt-Mogéville-Charrière wood-Fromezey. Finally, the 22nd Reserve Corps, in the sector of Strantz's Army Detachment, was to attack south of the Orne in the direction Warcq-Braquis-Fresnes.

### PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK

Although the success of the whole immense undertaking was based on the securing of surprise at the moment of the attack, we considered it necessary to construct shelters, communication trenches and places of assembly for some 6,000 men in our first line system, to allow us to concentrate under cover our storm troops, carrying troops and reserves. Here they could wait in full security until our artillery preparation had done its work, and then reach their jumping-off trenches unharmed by hostile fire. These works had to be planned on the map with the greatest care and as soon as possible, then reconnoitred, and finally constructed, with all precautions against detection by enemy observers and aircraft. Any considerable work in front of our lines would at once have betrayed our purpose to the enemy. We had, therefore, to rely on lanes through our wire, rapidly cut at the last moment, to allow of the passage of our infantry.

These preparations for the infantry attack, completed as they were only in a few sectors, allowed of the distribution of the three Corps in depth and facilitated supply, allotment of routes, and the provision of engineer and ammunition dumps. The terrain before Verdun was traversed by few roads, and little cultivated and poorly supplied with water; the question of supply and the handling of the vast quantities of munitions and material of all kinds was therefore considerably complicated by the lack of suitable railways and roads. The French preparations for their attack in Champagne had shown

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us that extensive work of this kind was invariably recognizable on aerial photographs, and therefore we were compelled, much to our regret, to deny to the troops many conveniences in the shape of dug-outs and communications, which could only have betrayed our designs to the enemy. All work and marching had to be done by night, and thus it was impossible to satisfy the demands of the commanders of the attacking corps, reasonable as these were, for greater assistance and consideration for their men. The 5th Corps, which was then in line, was alone responsible for the whole of the work on the front of attack, and all ranks, from its able Commander, General von Gündell, and his excellent Chief of Staff, Major Hasse, to the youngest private in the ranks, co-operated in carrying out this important and thankless task to the best of their ability. The sector, which had been in their hands since the first days of the war, was rapidly provided with positions of assembly, well sheltered from the hostile artillery; plank roads and light railways were constructed along the least exposed routes of approach; depots for fuses and shells were sited in ravines and copses, where they could remain undamaged by mud and rain. Thanks largely to the local knowledge of the 5th Reserve Corps, so usefully employed in every direction, the enemy had no warning of our projected offensive until too late to be of use to him. Every effort was made by the troops in line to convince the civilian population and the enemy that what work was being done was solely for the purpose of securing the sector against a hostile attack.

Much labour was devoted to concealing the battery positions against observation from the air, to providing shell-proof cover for the large dumps of ammunition, and to constructing an extensive network of supply lines. Miles and miles of telephone wire had to be laid down in order to ensure the correct working of the complicated system of artillery fire control. In order to secure complete co-operation between guns and infantry, every battery was placed under the general commanding the sector against which it was firing. Only the long-range heavy and railway guns were directly under the General commanding the Heavy Artillery of the Army. After reconnoitring the battery position the gun crews in each battery had first to construct their own gun pits and cover from the air; then the ammunition was brought up, and last

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of all the guns. The barrage formed the subject of a special order, which regulated the artillery tasks for the first stage of the attack. The forward zone of enemy trenches were to be bombarded by howitzer batteries only—one battery for every 150 yards—the strong points in the second line were to be reduced by the heavy high-angle and field-howitzer batteries. The flanking limits of each battery's fire zone were to be worked out before the opening of the bombardment, and the barrage was to be advanced according to the progress of the infantry attack. Counter battery work against recognized enemy gun positions was to be carried out by howitzers firing gas shell, while sufficient guns and howitzers were to be specially allotted to deal with individual enemy batteries coming into action in the course of the battle. Special stress was laid on the importance of dealing with great permanent works by means of reinforcing batteries, and co-operation was insisted on between the artillery of neighbouring sectors for counter battery work, enfilade fire against hostile trench lines, neutralization of fronts other than those of attack, and support of the corps on right and left by every possible means.

On the greater part of the front the hostile positions were commanded by our own, and observation from the ground was therefore sufficient ; on the rest of the line spotting was carried out from the air.

As the available roads were adequate neither in quantity nor in quality for the gigantic demands of the forthcoming battle, six days' supply of ammunition was brought forward before the commencement of the artillery preparations. One day's ration was placed under bomb-proof cover at the battery, two days' ration was dumped near by and sheltered from the weather. Three days' supply was kept at the sector dumps, and the remainder was brought up as required.

The system of artillery command was that the Army Commander issued instructions through the indefatigable General Schabel, commanding the Heavy Artillery, to the Corps Heavy Artillery Commanders, and these to the regiment and battalion groups under them.

During the whole course of the battles for Verdun this method of command was strictly adhered to. Later, by reason of the experience—not always fortunate—gained in these



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battles, it was abandoned in favour of the more flexible decentralized system, which gave each division its own artillery commander and therefore independent control even of its heavy artillery.

All the departments of my Army Staff, which were by degrees reinforced by special officers of all kinds, especially the Operations Section, those of the Generals of Artillery and of Engineers, and that of the Quartermaster, were feverishly busy all through this period of preparation. Our activities were, indeed, unprecedented. On January 8th the General commanding the 5th Reserve Corps, General von Gündell, asked that, on account of the manifold fresh duties incumbent on him, his headquarters might be moved from Ecurey to Marville on the high road, and I realized that our manifold difficulties were on all sides being energetically tackled and successfully resolved.

### THE ORDERS FOR THE ATTACK

The final orders for the attacking corps, and the artillery and trench mortar programmes, as based on the general plan for the offensive, were issued on His Imperial Majesty's birthday. I confined myself to laying stress on a few of the most important points to be observed.

On February 12th was to commence the bombardment of the French positions on the whole front around the fortress; under cover of this the assaulting troops of the 7th Reserve, 18th, 3rd and 15th Corps were to assemble in sectors "A" and "D," and about 5 p.m. to push forward patrols in sectors "A" to "C" as far as the hostile front trenches, and occupy them. Early next morning the further advance of the infantry was to be preceded by a renewed artillery bombardment of the second enemy position. The main principle of the operation was laid down in these words: "It must be impressed on all troops, both infantry and artillery, engaged in the battle for Verdun that the main thing is to prevent the attack being brought to a standstill at any point, and thus afford the French no respite to establish themselves in rearward positions and reorganize their resistance once it has been broken." The 7th Reserve Corps, to which were also attached the units of the 77th Brigade (5th Reserve Corps) posted in its sector, was instructed by the Army Command to halt and



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await further orders after the occupation of the area between Haumont wood and Samogneux had been completed, as the direction of advance of the 18th Corps would bring it across the front of the 5th Reserve Corps. The Army Command also reserved to itself the issue of the order for the commencement of the 15th Corps' attack in sector "D." To the troops of the 7th Reserve Corps in the sectors of attack of the 18th and 3rd Corps was allotted a special task—to be carried out as soon as the progress of the offensive permitted—the capture of the hostile position Ornes-Maucourt-Mogéville, thus filling up the gap between the 3rd and 15th Corps.

The instructions issued at the same time for the employment of the artillery and trench mortars gave in the form of a sketch-diagram the principles of distribution of fire and targets at the opening of the attack. Batteries and zones of fire and objectives were therein allotted for the various purposes, such as destruction of enemy trenches, the bombardment of permanent works, neutralization of battery positions, flanking fire against hostile lines, and sweeping of roads and valleys.

All the remaining guns, including the greater part of the field artillery, remained at the disposal of the General commanding. Its main task was counter battery work against the enemy's artillery. The heavy batteries were only to open fire an hour after the commencement of the general bombardment at 8 a.m., in order to silence the enemy batteries, which would already be feeling the effects of our previous counter battery work, by deliberate observed fire against each of them in succession.

The trench mortar bombardment was only to commence at 1 p.m., after this task had been satisfactorily completed.

At 5 p.m., when the infantry were to leave their trenches, the trench mortars and flanking artillery were to cease fire, and the whole of the guns allotted for the preparation against more distant objectives were to lift their fire gradually on to these targets. At nightfall the high-angle guns were also to cease fire, and the high-velocity guns and the mass of the field artillery were to employ harassing fire all night long against the area still held by the enemy and his back areas. The continuation of the advance proposed for the second day would be finally prepared by a renewed shelling of any enemy positions observed and known to be still occupied, and the

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progressive advance of the barrage was then to sweep the way clear for the infantry.

The commencement of the forward move of the artillery to new positions was timed to take place as soon as the infantry had assured the possession of the ridge 344-south of Beaumont-south of Herbebois.

Covered by the fire of the howitzers and the heavy high-angle and high-velocity guns, the field artillery and mobile field howitzers and 18 cm. batteries were to move forward first, followed by the howitzers and heavy high-angle guns as soon as the first arrivals had opened fire to cover them. For this move each General commanding the Heavy Artillery had to take into consideration the particular circumstances on his front—a matter of great difficulty, as we all foresaw clearly. The immobile guns, those unprovided with teams and the long-range high-velocity guns were at first to remain in their original positions. It was strictly laid down that at no point on the battlefield and at no moment must the enemy be left unmolested by artillery fire.

The 6th Reserve and 15th Corps and the Army Detachment Strantz received special instructions to support the attack by the neutralization and destruction of certain hostile artillery groups and by other definite tasks.

The Army Detachments and Corps belonging to my Group of Armies, which were not destined to take part in the offensive, were ordered to carry out during the few days preceding the attack a methodical bombardment of all hostile batteries and trenches on their front, so as to give rise to the impression that a serious advance was in contemplation. Further, by means of violent shelling during the first few days of the offensive, they were to make the enemy cautious in withdrawing forces for use on the front actually menaced. The execution of similar measures of diversion was recommended to all our armies on the Western front.

I myself, during this rapidly passing period of preparation, regarded the supervision of the field works as one of my most important tasks, and this also gave me a welcome opportunity to come into close contact with the newly-arrived troops. My frequent journeys, especially one to Moncel, near Conflans, the headquarters of the Army Detachment Strantz, left me with a vivid impression of the fearful state of the roads behind

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the front of attack ; they were mostly quite insufficient for heavy traffic, in consequence of their frequent repairing and bad relaying. Since the autumn of 1914 we had devoted endless trouble and labour to this task, and yet we finally had to confine ourselves to maintaining the main roads leading from north to south, and extending the network of light railways, roads and tramways wherever possible. The troops, accustomed to more hospitable districts, complained bitterly of the apparent neglect of their needs ; but I must do my indefatigable Quartermaster and his staff the justice of defending them in this matter. The labour companies, the so-called "navvies," deserve also a high meed of praise ; the men of all classes and trades enlisted in these companies vied with each other in their efforts to do their duty.

On January 29th I visited the observation post of the General commanding the Heavy Artillery of Sector "B," on the Morimont, and assured myself of the good progress made in the plan of work, reconnaissances and battery construction. On the 30th I was present at the installation of a 42 cm. howitzer battery near Etraye, and next day I watched the erection of a plank road for battery and ammunition transport in sector "A."

Working on the basis of the strategical, tactical and administrative orders issued by the Army Command, the commanders and staffs of the lower formations devoted all their time and energy to the accomplishment of their difficult tasks, in a manner worthy of the magnitude of the aim we had set ourselves to achieve. The engineer parks detached from the Army engineer park at St. Martin, all engineer formations, siege trains, and so forth, were distributed among the army corps, as were also the horse-drawn trains and lorry columns. The men and teams of the pontoon companies also rendered useful service, even before they could be set to work on bridging the Meuse. One construction section, assisted by six field railway officials, carried on the service of the narrow-gauge railways, with their engines and sixty-four stations between Sivry and Gondrecourt. The full utilization of this and all other means of transport was necessary for the delivery of the masses of supplies and material required by the fighting troops. Not only had ammunition, engineers' tools, food and water to be sent forward, but the wounded had to be transported

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to the rear and distributed to field hospitals, collecting and clearing stations and ambulance trains. Special collection areas were allotted for prisoners, arms and other booty. Each station had its own railway detraining staff, each road was surveyed by foot police, and at important traffic points there were posted road controls to regulate the passage. In order to facilitate the bringing forward of resting troops and reserves the boundaries of the various sectors were extended far back into the rear zone of the army.

### THE DEPLOYMENT FOR THE ATTACK

The Generals commanding the Heavy Artillery in the corps sectors took over the control of their artillery, under the general direction of the commander of the 5th Reserve Corps, as from February 5th. All the artillery staffs came into action, in order to learn to work in with each other and avoid any possible friction. For the present, however, the enemy's fire, which was by no means intense or frequent, was replied to only by the guns of the 5th Reserve Corps, already in position. It was primarily desirable to conceal any traces of increase in our forces, and for this purpose all our flying and fighting squadrons and Fokkers were to endeavour, while still carrying out their tasks of close and distant reconnaissance, aerial barrage and attack and taking of photographs, to avoid being recognized either while in flight or in their hangars.

The 7th Reserve Corps was the first of the attacking formations to take over its sector "A" on the right wing. The 3rd Corps, in sector "C," relieved the troops of the 5th Reserve Corps on the night of February 10th-11th. It was agreed that certain units of the 5th Reserve Corps should carry out a demonstration at Gremilly, in order to facilitate the advance of the 3rd Corps on Herbebois. The 18th Corps was directed to bring up its troops in rear of the garrison of the front line formed by the 5th Reserve Corps, and to be in position by the 12th.

Considering the short period of preparation allowed us for the attack on Verdun, it has always been a marvel to me that so much was achieved. Everyone, from generals to privates and drivers, set to work to fulfil the rôle allotted to him in this enormous task, despite the greatest obstacles,



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difficulties and disappointments, usually so disastrous to the strength and spirit of troops. By February 8th the transport of the necessary artillery material, including about 160 heavy and siege batteries, about two and a half million shells and 1,300 ammunition trains, had been practically completed; and by means of constant camouflage work, carried on under cover of the cold and rainy nights of winter, this immense task had been accomplished without in any way arousing the suspicions of the enemy.

We were now within a few days of the great offensive, which was timed for February 12th. I therefore determined to do my own small share in deceiving and misleading the enemy by making a visit to the Army Detachment Gaede, on my extreme left wing, taking care that reports of this should reach him. I hoped that his intelligence service would be informed of the interest I evinced in the bombardment of Belfort from the concrete shelters near Zillesheim. Certainly, as on my visit to the 7th and 8th Landwehr Divisions, I passed through that nest of spies, Mülhausen, my presence could hardly be kept a secret, and the enemy would probably hear that I had shaken hands with the left flank sentry of the German Army and with the Swiss post on the frontier of Switzerland. Thus was the attention of the enemy diverted to those fronts, to the benefit of our surprise against Verdun. Even if we were unable to execute a feint attack in Upper Alsace, my arrival there and the firing of the newly-arrived heavy calibre artillery might at least give rise to a fear that some offensive operation was in prospect, and this increased our chances of success at Verdun. We also hoped for good results, material and moral, from the shooting of our naval guns, which had been placed in position in Warpremont Wood and at Loison, with orders to shell the town and citadel of Verdun, and also to sweep the ridge from the Raben Wood to the Mort Homme on the west bank of the Meuse.

On February 11th I issued the following proclamation, dated the 12th: "After a long period of stubborn defence, the orders of His Majesty, our Emperor and King, call us to the attack!

"Let us all fortify ourselves with the knowledge that the Fatherland expects great things of us! We must show our foes that the iron will to victory is still alive in the hearts of



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Germany's sons, and that the German Army, when it advances to the assault, beats down all resistance! In the firm confidence that all ranks will give of their best, I order you to advance. God be with us!"

In the afternoon I held at my battle headquarters at Vitarville what I believed would be the last conference with my commanding generals and their chiefs of staff. But the god of the weather suddenly took it into his head to derange all our plans. Rain and snowstorms, which entirely precluded the possibility of observation, made a postponement of the attack almost inevitable. Certainly every day lost threatened to deprive us of our best ally, the factor of surprise; and the close concentration of troops and material, the fear that the work already done might be swept away in floods and mud, and the deterioration of our exposed ammunition made it no easy matter to put off the date of the offensive. We had to do so, however, subject to the proviso that all times in the orders already issued were to be advanced every twenty-four hours.

So every day, from February 12th to 20th, consumed with anxiety lest our great enterprise should be prematurely revealed or betrayed, we vainly looked for a break in the weather. It was a time of deep and nerve-racking anxiety for the responsible army commander and his chief of staff, and of a regrettable strain on the nerves of the troops. The weather certainly prevented enemy observation, but a few wretched deserters went over to his lines during these eight days. It is true that he seems to have given little credence to their reports.

With the full moon, on February 20th, there came a north-east wind and a slight frost, and as the atmospheric conditions improved several hostile balloons went up. We observed a considerable increase of trench work on the north-east front, a great deal of traffic in the area of Clermont, and freshly dug strong points at Louvemont and Douaumont. But the enemy appears to have been even now uncertain as to the time, strength and direction of our offensive, and his artillery fire was not above normal.

We know to-day, from French sources, that the enemy High Command had indeed reckoned with the possibility of an attack on Verdun, but was not clear as to the time at which it was to take place; its attention was rather centred

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on the front in Champagne and Alsace-Lorraine. Joffre, having been repeatedly warned in January of the menacing situation at Verdun, ordered, at Castelnau's suggestion, an intensive construction of positions in the fortress area, and the improvement of the railway and road communications to Verdun from the south and south-west. He omitted, however, to reinforce the troops at the disposal of the Governor, and indeed preferred to assemble his reserve army of four corps and a numerous heavy artillery further west in Champagne.

### THE FIRST ASSAULT, FEBRUARY 21ST TO 26TH

Shortly before 8 a.m. on February 21st the General Commanding the Artillery, General Schabel, and the corps commanders received their instructions to open fire. In the clear winter air the thunder of the howitzers opened the chorus, which rapidly swelled to such a din as none of those who heard it had ever experienced hitherto. On my arrival at battle headquarters in Vitarville about 10 a.m., my Chief of Staff reported to me that the enemy fire was weak and apparently aimless, while our guns were shooting excellently and with visible effect. In a few minutes, however, heavy shells began to fall in Vitarville—the first which had ever done so since the investment of Verdun had begun! The earliest casualties of which I heard thus occurred in the near neighbourhood of my battle post. My Chief of Staff was nervous of a deliberate bombardment of the headquarters of the Army Staff—the position of which might have been betrayed by spies—with the object of preventing or interrupting our work. I approved, therefore, of his suggestion to withdraw temporarily to Stenay, whither I proceeded by way of the battle headquarters of the 18th Corps at Merles.

In reality, the enemy, surprised by the annihilating volume of our fire, only shelled a few villages at random. At 5 p.m. our barrage jumped on to his second line, and the skirmishers and shock troops of all these corps left their trenches. The material effect of our bombardment had been, as we discovered later, rather below our expectations, as the hostile defences in the wooded country were in many cases too well concealed; the moral effect, however, was immense. Everywhere the infantry encountered only slight resistance. The 7th Reserve

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Corps rapidly attained the south-west edge of Haumont wood; the 18th Corps occupied the French first line, but was unable to penetrate before nightfall into the extensive depths of Caures wood; the 3rd Corps reached Ville wood and Soumazannes. Our losses were at first small, but increased towards evening, when the enemy heavily shelled our points of departure and zones of advance.

On February 22nd, after an organized artillery preparation, the assault recommenced about midday. The 7th Reserve Corps consolidated its guns on the Haumont wood line, bombarded the Brabant line and Haumont village with good effect, and carried these strong positions late that evening. Further to the west the enemy were seen to be in retreat. The 18th Corps, which had received strict orders to secure Caures wood on this day, was during the afternoon fiercely engaged in the neighbourhood of the Ville-Vacherauville road. The corps on either flank were ordered to assist the 18th Corps and support its flanks, and by nightfall the corps had stormed the main enemy position in the wood. The 3rd Corps also was in possession of the enemy second line in Ville wood, and was fighting around the redoubts in Herbebois.

According to prisoners' statements, the French were hurrying up reinforcements along all the roads from the south and south-west.

On the 23rd, amid a slight drizzle of snow, the infantry attack, after a systematic artillery preparation, commenced at midday. The enemy had collected reserves for local counter-attacks and shelled the areas occupied by us somewhat heavily, besides bringing flanking fire to bear from the west bank. The 7th Reserve Corps, supported by General von Dewitz's 77th Brigade, during the course of the afternoon stormed the Brabant line, the village of that name and the ridges south and south-east of Haumont, while keeping back a good proportion of its units in reserve in Consenvoye wood. The 18th Corps secured the rest of Caures wood, Fay copse and the positions south of Beaumont. The 3rd Corps took Wavrille wood, and made a certain amount of headway in the heavily-wired thickets of Herbebois. The 5th Reserve and 15th Corps were not yet engaged, but maintained a heavy fire all along their front between Gremilly and Etain. Our total casualties so far had not been excessive.

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During the night of the 23rd-24th the 57th Reserve Infantry Regiment of the 7th Reserve Corps occupied Samogneux village on the Meuse, and the infantry of the 3rd Corps found Herbebois clear of the enemy. Some of our batteries had already moved to their forward positions; the enemy's fire was visibly diminishing in volume. After several hours' bombardment, we renewed the attack about 2 p.m. on the 24th. The 7th Reserve Corps, despite the effective artillery support of the 6th Reserve Corps, suffered considerably from the enfilade fire of the French batteries in position on the west bank around the "Mort Homme" and the Bois des Corbeaux. General von Kühne's 13th Division was charged with the task of covering the right flank of the attack in the area Brabant-Samogneux-Haumont. The 14th Reserve Division (General Loeb) was withdrawn into reserve, and the 77th Brigade attached to the 18th Corps. Thus reinforced, this corps carried the important ridge 344-326, east of Samogneux and Beaumont village. The 3rd Corps, in a magnificent advance, cleared Fosses, Chaume, Carrière and Vavette woods, and units of the 5th Reserve Corps reached Ornes. That evening we held the whole of the enemy's main position! Not only had his defensive system been broken asunder, but his moral had seriously suffered; he had nowhere been able to put up an effective resistance, and all his works, batteries and communications in his back areas as far as Verdun itself lay exposed to the effective and harassing fire of our artillery. We had now to set to work to bring the tottering edifice of his defence crashing to the ground before he could buttress it with the aid of the reserves now being hurried forward by lorry column from Clermont.

The heavy artillery in all these sectors of attack was directed to move forward on the night of the 25th, so as to be in a better position to afford rapid and effective support for our further advance. Our only infantry reserve now consisted of the 14th Reserve Division, which had already been in action. Reinforcements had been expressly promised us, and were to be held in immediate readiness in rear of the front of attack; transport difficulties had prevented their arrival before the opening of the offensive, and still they had not come up! Even the 22nd Reserve Corps, which had been allotted to the Army Detachment Strantz, and which might have been utilized on the



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heights of the Meuse instead of on the Woivre plain, had not been sent us. In its place the High Command had sent to Strantz the Bavarian Ersatz Division, which was unsuited for use in the assault on the main front. I and all those who fought in and lived through the fierce struggles of these fateful days will share my sentiments on realizing that, on the admission even of French military writers, the resistance of the enemy was at this date effectively shaken and the road to Verdun clear. General Herr, the Governor, considered the fortress as lost, as seven divisions had been unable to stem our irresistible advance. We were, in fact, within a stone's throw of victory! But I had no reserves left for the immediate and energetic exploitation of our first successes, and the troops, who had been fighting uninterruptedly for four days, found the task beyond their strength. So the psychological moment passed unutilized. On the night of the 25th the 20th French Corps arrived at Verdun and was at once thrown into the breach. Joffre's express orders enjoined that the heights on the right bank of the Meuse were to be maintained at any cost.

February 25th, the fifth day of battle, began with a heavy enemy shelling from the west bank, which brought to a stand an advance of the 77th Brigade on the Talou hill, and this formation now came once more under the orders of the 7th Reserve Corps and undertook the covering of the right flank on the Meuse in conjunction with the 13th Reserve Division. The 14th Reserve Division, in Army reserve, was brought forward to Beaumont. The 18th Corps, despite violent hostile counter-attacks, occupied Louvemont and the north-eastern slopes of Poivre hill. The 3rd Corps reached the southern edge of Chaufour wood; and one of its companies, the 2nd of the 24th Regiment, under the skilful leadership of Capt. Haupt and Lieut. Brandis, gained possession of Fort Douaumont, and the ridge between Douaumont and Bezonvaux also fell into this corps' hands. In close union with it, the 5th Reserve Corps pushed forward in the plain as far as Bezonvaux-Dieppe and the 15th Corps to the line Vaux Pond-Haraigne-Jean de Vaux wood. Touch was gained at St. Maurice with Strantz's Detachment, which was also directed to advance, with the aid of the newly arrived Bavarian Ersatz Division. The enemy evacuated the Woivre plain without serious resistance, but on the heights violent counter-attacks with fresh troops took



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place. At the same time rain set in and the ground, as had been feared, rapidly became a quagmire; and this additional hardship threatened to complete the exhaustion of our gallant infantry. The advance of the remainder of the heavy artillery also caused interminable delays and blocks on the roads in rear of the front. His Imperial Majesty on February 25th visited my headquarters to hear my report as to the progress of the battle, and expressed to all units his admiration and gratitude for their heroic achievements.

On February 26th, the weather having cleared once more, the 7th Reserve Corps pushed forward patrols to Champneuville-Talou hill and the quarries north of Vacherauville. The advance of the 18th Corps on its left, however, was checked in the strongly defended woods and valleys south of Louvemont. The 3rd Corps maintained possession of Douaumont fort despite violent enemy counter-attacks with fresh troops, but could not penetrate into the village, which was stubbornly held. Further to the east the 5th and the Reserve Corps scaled the heights of the Meuse and occupied Hardaumont redoubt and the trenches to the south of it. In the plain our advanced troops reached Dieppe, and the 15th Corps advanced as far as the line Abaucourt-Herméville-Bourbeau farm, maintaining touch west of Ville on Woevre with the Army Detachment Strantz. Our rapid progress in the plains, which exercised the real influence on the general situation, was due to the weak resistance of the enemy and the freshness of our troops in that sector; in the main battlefield on the heights, however, our attack had come to a standstill, and the active defensive thenceforward adopted by General Petain swayed the balance against us. In this the course of events only followed the invariable psychological law, as soon as the exalted offensive spirit of our troops had been sapped by the physical and moral exhaustion resulting from the excessive strain of the fighting and the difficulties of weather and ground.

### THE OFFENSIVE COMES TO A STANDSTILL

An attempt by the 7th Reserve Corps to force the passage of the Meuse near Samogneux-Regnéville on the night of February 27th was checked by wire entanglements concealed in the riverbed, so that the 6th Reserve Corps' offensive against Forges had to be postponed. The efforts of the 18th Corps to gain ground

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also proved unsuccessful; hostile attacks on the 3rd Corps' front were repulsed. Evidently the French, who, according to prisoners' stories, had at one time intended to retire, had now decided to maintain their ground on the heights of the east bank. We were unhappily not in a position to deny him the time to fortify his lines. The forward move of our artillery and the bringing up of munitions through the sodden crater area was a matter of endless time and difficulty. The 113th Infantry Division, which had at last been placed at our disposal, was still in course of transport from Metz. The last two days of the month, which were marked by a considerable increase in the volume and violence of the hostile artillery fire on both banks of the river, were devoted to reorganizing the units, which had been much mixed up and had suffered severely in the recent fighting, and to providing for the most pressing needs of the troops. The 7th Reserve Corps, with the 13th Reserve Division and the 77th Brigade, occupied the area Brabant-Champneuville-Vacherauville. In the 18th Reserve Corps' sector the 14th Reserve Division took over from General von Oven's 21st Division as far as Chauffour Wood (exclusive); while General Kuhne's 25th Division remained in line on its left. The 3rd Corps took possession of the permanent works to the west of Douaumont, but was held up before the village itself. On its left the 5th Reserve Corps held the front line by Hardaumont redoubt to the foot of the heights. In the plain the enemy line facing the 15th Corps and Strantz's Detachment ran by Damloup and Eix to Chatillon.

On February 28th General von Graf's Bavarian Ersatz Division forced the French back by Haudiomont and Konvaux to the foot of the hills, but were unable to set foot on the ridge itself. The 5th Landwehr Division, under General Aulek, stormed Manheulles. This concluded the advance of Strantz's Army Detachment. The subsequent capture of Fresnes on March 7th, a striking feat of arms on the part of the Posen Grenadiers and Thuringian Landwehr, had no influence on the general situation. Our captures to date amounted to 10,000 prisoners, 65 guns and 75 machine guns.

In the presence of the Chief of Staff of the Field Armies, we once again took up the question of assuming the offensive on the western bank. This course seemed to us all the more

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necessary, on account of the extremely serious effect of the flanking fire from the hostile guns behind the Marre ridge against our troops on the east bank. In order to combat this, we should have to push forward our own artillery to the line of the Mort Homme and Corbeaux Wood. This time we were able to carry our point; but the purpose of our request was now quite different from what it had been in our previous discussion with the High Command before the initial plan of attack had been drawn up. Then it was a question of delivering a simultaneous blow on both banks, with the purpose of reducing the fortress at the earliest possible moment; now our proposal was based rather on the tactical necessity of relieving our main attack on the eastern bank from a harassing fire, which was hindering its further progress. It was by this time clear that our original scheme of short successive advances had not given all the hoped-for results; but we had no justification for despairing of final success or for breaking off the offensive. Certainly the task now appeared more difficult than before the initial assault on February 21st, as the French had now brought up strong reinforcements, and yet more were at hand. If we could succeed, however, in wearing these down as far as possible in the further course of the fighting, a considerable moral and material victory would be achieved. To this extent we were at one with General von Falkenhayn. One condition, however, appeared to us to be essential for any real hope of success by these means: we must be absolutely assured that the High Command was in a position to furnish us with the necessary men and material for the continuance of the offensive, and that not by dribblets, but on a large scale. Failing this, we should be well advised to break off the battle straightway, as we should also have to do were it to become manifest in the course of the further fighting that we ourselves were losing more heavily and becoming exhausted more rapidly than the enemy.

The command of the 10th Reserve Corps (22nd Reserve and 11th Bavarian Divisions and twenty-one heavy batteries) was given to Lieutenant-General Rosch.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE FIGHTING FROM MARCH TO MAY, 1916

#### ATTACKS ON BOTH BANKS OF THE MEUSE IN THE FIRST HALF OF MARCH

WHILE the offensive on the left bank was in preparation the attacking corps on the right bank devoted their energies to improving the line held by them as a jumping-off ground for a further methodical advance. The exhausted troops, racked by the strain of constant exposure to shell-fire, meanwhile sought to secure some sort of shelter for themselves and improve the facilities for the sending up of supplies. The attack on the western bank was timed for March 6th, and operations on the east bank were to be resumed only on the 7th, so as to allow time for the arrival of fresh and well-equipped forces. Unhappily the gallant efforts of the 5th Division, under General Wichura during the capture of Douaumont village on March 2nd rendered that unit for the moment unfit for further action; it had enough to do to hold its ground against hostile counter-attacks until the 113th Division came up to its aid. The 3rd Corps had also to be reinforced by a brigade from the 15th Corps. The 13th Reserve Division of the 7th Reserve Corps relieved the exhausted 25th Division of the 16th Corps, and the newly arrived 121st Division was brought up into second line behind the 5th Reserve Corps.

Meanwhile, on March 6th, a day of heavy, driving snow-storms, the 22nd Reserve Division (General Riemann) attached to the 6th Reserve Corps, commenced its attack. At the same time units of the 7th Reserve Corps (the 37th Fusilier Regiment of the 77th Brigade) moved on to the left bank of the Meuse by way of Brabant and Champneuville. Forges, the ridge south of the brook of that name, and Regneville fell



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into our hands. By March 10th the 22nd Reserve Division had cleared Corbeaux and Cumières woods and the area eastward as far as the Meuse. To its right the 6th Reserve Corps, advancing by Bethincourt, was unable to penetrate as far as the northern slopes of the "Mort Homme" till March 14th, while our whole front east of the Meuse as far as the 18th Corps sector was continually being subjected to violent bombardment and counterstrokes. The successes secured on the western bank were not sufficient at present to permit of the necessary pushing forward of our artillery behind the front held by the Infantry of the 6th Reserve Corps, which had been the purpose of the whole operation.

The resumption of the offensive on the eastern bank, which had originally been timed for the 7th, had to be adjourned till the 9th, owing to difficulties of ammunition supply. Distant objectives were purposely given the troops in the hope that deep penetration at the weak points of the enemy defences might facilitate the capture of the stronger parts of his position.

Owing to the close contact between our lines and those of the enemy, and the unceasing artillery fire on both sides, our preparations for the attack were considerably interrupted. Even on March 8th the front line corps were at some points fighting far into the night. Next day the 7th Reserve Corps failed to make any headway against Poivre hill, and the 18th and 3rd Corps only got as far as Albain wood and the Vaux valley, with their left flank in Vaux village. The 9th Reserve Division, however, thanks to the personal intervention of its Commander, General von Guretzky-Cornitz, succeeded in getting close up to Fort Vaux. Whether the work passed for the moment into our hands, as was reported by the front line troops at the time, is not certain, but in the evening the 5th Reserve Corps' line ran uninterruptedly from Vaux village to the north-western angle of the fort. Our offensive of March 9th had thus failed entirely to come up to our expectations.

In view of the alarming increase in our casualties during the course of this fluctuating and unsuccessful fighting, particularly on the right bank, we at Army Headquarters felt that a crisis must shortly be reached. Telephonic instructions were issued to all the corps leaders as to the measures to be taken for reliefs, and care of the troops, and as to the general conduct of the fighting, which was daily increasing in violence.



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The 77th Brigade was sent back to the 5th Reserve Corps from the 7th Reserve Corps, to which it had previously been attached. Everywhere our progress had been checked by unbroken wires, heavily shelled barrage zones, or fire from flanking positions in the valleys. Our own units, endeavouring to assist each other's advance in a similar manner by mutual fire support, were unable to do so effectively, owing to their lack of knowledge of the ground.

The whole army front from the 18th Reserve Corps west of the Argonne to the Army Detachment Strantz was engaged on March 11 in a violent artillery duel, the prelude to a joint advance by the 3rd and 5th Reserve Corps across the Vaux valley against the fort; it broke down, however, before the flanking fire of the enemy. The combatant strength of the 3rd Corps had now sunk so low that Main Headquarters next day consented to the despatch of the 19th Reserve Division from Upper Alsace and the 58th Division from the Army Detachment Falkenhausen; the former was to relieve General Herhdt von Rohden's 6th Division and together with the 113th Division to come under the command of the 10th Reserve Corps, transferred from the western bank; the garrison of Douaumont was also attached to this corps. The 19th Reserve Division (General von Wartenberg) relieved the 25th Division of the 18th Corps. The movements necessary for the supply and relief of these various troops were not effected without severe losses from the hostile searching fire. We had now, after the first victorious rush of the grand attack, been caught in the costly and fatal toils of fierce local fighting, and could only hope for the negative success of inflicting more losses than we suffered.

Two of my attacking corps were now exhausted and had been taken out of the line. Even now I think with heartfelt pride of the unparalleled valour of the Brandenburgers, Hessians and Westphalians who bore the whole fearful burden of the first assault on Verdun. God knows it was no fault of theirs that the enemy's citadel still stood firm.

During the reliefs a series of new orders were issued for the advance to the line of hills Thiaumont redoubt-Fleury-Hill wood, and the measures for the reduction of redoubts and for mutual support, as well as the general conduct of the operation, were fully discussed with the corps commanders.

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In order to facilitate the task of the Army Command and ensure a better direction of the operations, we decided on the formation of an intermediate command between the Army and the Corps; and about the middle of March the experienced General von Mudra, of the Argonne corps, with a provisional staff, and headquarters at Nouillon, assumed the command of the 10th Reserve and 5th Reserve Corps, now forming the new "Eastern Attacking Group."

Artillery activity on both sides during the course of that month increased at frequent intervals to a great intensity, and our laboriously constructed trenches were often completely wrecked, and the carrying parties of all kinds suffered severely from the frequent shelling of roads and villages. These losses were particularly serious in the Woivre plains in the 5th Reserve and 15th Corps areas. Our losses, large enough at all times, increased manifold at these centres of intense fire. Battery positions and munition depots were frequently badly damaged by fires and explosions caused by the flanking fire of the enemy; as against this, however, we had the satisfaction of observing the fires caused by our shells in Verdun and other places, and among the enemy dumps. Clear, dry spring weather now occasionally came to hearten up the troops, whose daily toil in the line trenches and on carrying parties was certainly not to be envied. The enemy expressed his determination to hold on to Verdun by means of repeated infantry attacks, for which we had to be constantly on the lookout. On the western bank, too, he had begun to reinforce his heavy artillery, while in the air only the heroism and skill of our pilots enabled them to maintain their supremacy over their adversaries.

### PARTIAL ATTACKS DURING THE SECOND HALF OF MARCH

The main weight of our attack was now on the west bank in the sector of the 6th Reserve Corps. On March 20th, General von Kneussl's 11th Bavarian Division stormed a series of successive positions and captured Malancourt and Avocourt woods with 2,500 prisoners. An attempt to secure Haucourt and Malancourt from the west next day failed of its purpose, as the attack was enfiladed too effectively from the south; none the less 1,000 prisoners were secured. The next aim of the

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6th Reserve Corps was to shorten its front by the occupation of the line Avocourt-Hill 304-Mort Homme-Cumières, and from there to push forward gradually with the offensive against the Marre ridge, while continually securing its right flank in the wooded country to the west. For this purpose Main Headquarters promised the assistance of the 22nd Reserve Corps (43rd and 44th Reserve Divisions) under General von Falkenhayn, but these troops had first to go through a period of intensive training in trench storming and bombing.

It was now decided to form on the west bank also a special Attacking Group under General von Gallwitz, who, with his staff, had just returned from the Balkan theatre. Lieut.-Colonel Bronsart von Schellendorf, Chief of Staff of the 7th Reserve Corps, was appointed to the Western Attacking Group, the headquarters of which were to be situated at Charmoise. On March 28th, before this new command had come into being, units of the 11th Reserve Division (General von Hertzsberg) captured the north-western portion of Malancourt and the trenches adjoining, with 500 prisoners, and by the 30th the whole village was in our hands. For the continuance of the operations between Hesse wood and the Meuse, General von Gallwitz, who assumed command on the 29th, organized his troops as follows: The 6th Reserve Corps on the right wing to consist of the 11th Bavarian Division, 192nd Brigade and 11th Reserve Division; the 22nd Reserve Corps on the left of the 12th, 22nd, 43rd and 44th Reserve Division. The 2nd Landwehr Division on the right of the 6th Reserve Corps remained at the direct disposal of the Group Commander.

On the right bank of the river the Eastern Group had developed its plans still further. General von Mudra proposed to work forward by groups, and by skilful use of the ground and with the aid of close artillery support to secure and consolidate the line south-west of Douaumont-south-east edge of Caillette wood-Fort Vaux. New formations had taken the place of the infantry of the 18th Corps, which by March 21st had been withdrawn to rest and refit. The construction of saps, fire steps and communication trenches, methodically organized by the Group Command and favoured by good weather conditions, progressed rapidly, although the enemy's trench-mortars and bombs continually hindered the work. By the 24th, units of the 5th Reserve Corps had worked forward

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to within 60 yards of the glacis of Fort Vaux, and established themselves there with the aid of light mountain batteries brought up in close support. The 121st Division of the same corps, on March 26th, secured a further portion of Vaux village and made excellent headway in the methodical reduction of the other defences in the village. General von Mudra resolved to continue the advance in two stages, after the troops had, as a preliminary, secured good local jumping-off ground by means of partial offensives. The first stage was to comprise the capture of Caillette wood and Fort Vaux, on April 2nd, to be followed on April 6th by the second stage, the occupation of Thiaumont redoubt, Fleury village and the ridge of Berg wood and Fort la Lauffée. The successful accomplishment of these extensive aims appeared to the Group to be beyond the powers of the units of the 5th Reserve Corps in line at the end of March ; but, in recognition of their magnificent achievements, leave was given them at their own request to remain in occupation of their hard-won lines until a fresh division should come in to carry on the attack. As the General Commanding the 5th Reserve Corps reported on March 30th that his troops would be fit for action again on April 5th, the corps was placed at the disposal of Mudra's Group for employment wherever necessary.

On the whole, the partial attacks now being undertaken met with little real success. On March 30th, uncut wire caused the breakdown of an attempt to widen our area of occupation by the capture of a number of trenches south of Douaumont. On the morrow the 121st Division brought in several hundred prisoners from the quarries north-west of Vaux village.

### DISCUSSIONS WITH MAIN HEADQUARTERS AS TO THE CONTINUATION OF THE ATTACK AT THE END OF MARCH AND THE BEGINNING OF APRIL

While we were thus preparing for a new and clearly defined series of operations, we received, on March 30th, a request from General von Falkenhayn for information as to our plans for the continuance of the offensive, particularly on the right bank. He also asked whether, in the view of those concerned in the attack, there were hopes of success within a



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reasonable period of time, and if anything could be done by Main Headquarters to facilitate such success.

We, in our reply, stated in as many words that, in considering the results of the fighting up to the present, and our estimates of the wastage of French strength, we inclined to the belief that the fate of the French army would be decided by the issue of the Battle of Verdun; and considered that our best course was to employ every possible means at our disposal of using up the enemy's effective reserves alike of troops, munitions and material. We proposed, therefore, to continue the offensive on the eastern bank as far as the line Thiaumont redoubt - Fleury - Fort Souville - Fort Tavannes; but this could only be accomplished by the frequent relief of our exhausted troops by a constant stream of fresh formations, so that intact reserves could always be kept in hand! The supply of material and munitions would have to be maintained as heretofore, so as to maintain continual pressure on the east bank. The objectives of the attack on the west bank were laid down as follows: Avocourt wood-Hill 304-Mort Homme-Hill north of Chattancourt-Cumières.

It was clear from General von Falkenhayn's reply to this letter at the beginning of April, that Main Headquarters could not altogether accept my estimate of the serious wastage of the French forces to date, or of the reserves still available. So far as numbers went, the French and British Armies together had certainly sufficient reserves in hand to undertake a large-scale offensive elsewhere. "Therefore, it seems"—the letter went on to say—"that the Army Command is too optimistic as to what is and what is not possible to us. The hypothesis that we are in a position to keep up a constant supply of fresh and highly-trained troops to replace those exhausted in battle, and also of the necessary supplies and ammunition, is erroneous. Even with the best will in the world, we could not do it."

From these expressions it was obvious that our conviction that Verdun would decide the fate of the French Army was not entirely shared by Main Headquarters, who would be quite satisfied if, during the limited period for which the supply of men, material and munitions could be maintained, we could keep the French under effective pressure and compel them either to throw in their reserves in large numbers until



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they were exhausted or else abandon to us the northern sector of the battlefield. But to accomplish this we must advance; fluctuating and indecisive fighting could never fulfil the object we had in view.

From all this it was clear that :—

Firstly, we should throw in all our available strength in order to make progress in the present battlefield on the Meuse.

Secondly, that we must resign ourselves to abandoning our chosen method of local attacks with small forces, and seeking a decision elsewhere, as soon as it was clear that the results aimed at could not be obtained within a reasonable period.

In the latter case it would certainly be said that we had not won the Battle of Verdun; but this was already being said, and could and should be taken into consideration.

Our chances of ending the war quickly would certainly be greatly increased if the battle were won; but if we failed to win it, even after what had already been achieved, our victory would merely be postponed and not rendered impossible, especially if we resolved in good time not to persist with our useless efforts at Verdun, but to take the initiative of attack elsewhere.

The view taken by General von Falkenhayn seemed to me in the main incontestable. If Main Headquarters, from their wider and more balanced view of the enemy's situation, considered that the effects by our offensive had been less important than we had supposed, and further stated that they were not in a position to continue to supply us with men and munitions at the same rate as heretofore, then the basis of our contention that the fate of the French Army would be decided at Verdun was no longer sound. I therefore agreed absolutely with his proposal that the question as to whether the offensive should be continued or broken off should be settled by the result of the partial attack on the east bank, our plans for which met with his entire approval. I was much gratified to observe that, as seemed clear from his letter, the earlier idea of "bleeding the enemy white" in a long drawn-out battle had been abandoned, and that there was no intention of persisting in a purposeless struggle before Verdun. This I can affirm with all my heart. My Chief of Staff, on the other hand, with that steadfastness which was his finest characteristic, adhered to his view that whatever happened we must hold

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fast to the idea of attacking and wearing down the enemy. The divergences of opinion between myself and General Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, which was born in these critical days, grew more acute as time passed, and eventually led to a rupture. Although I then believed that my views were in accord in every respect with those of General von Falkenhayn, I was soon to learn that this was unhappily not the case, but that the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Armies, in direct contradiction to his own written appreciation, was, in reality, a firm upholder of the ideas held by my Chief of Staff as regards the main question under discussion.

The estimate of the military and political situation which led General von Falkenhayn, in December, 1915, to decide for the offensive against Verdun, had meanwhile been shown to be based on a second false hypothesis, which threatened to throw our whole strategic machine out of gear. His proposals for the further conduct of the war had, as will be remembered, been based on the supposition that the blow against the French on land would be accompanied by the opening of unrestricted submarine warfare in English waters. At the decisive conference of March 4th this sound proposal, which was favoured by both Falkenhayn and Tirpitz, was vetoed by the political authorities, who in their unwisdom believed that victory against a world of foes was to be gained by striking with only half one's strength. With the decision to leave unutilized this weapon, which expert opinion had pronounced ready and available in sufficient quantity, there vanished all hope of turning against England the hunger blockade with which she was slowly but surely sapping our vitals. This weak decision soon made its influence felt even on our operations before Verdun; for had the enemy been suddenly deprived of his supply of war material owing to the blockade of his ports, it must, indeed, have gone hard with him. But the ports remained open, the while my gallant army, at death-grips with the enemy before the fortress, was, by the admission of the Chief of the General Staff himself, threatened with an approaching shortage of supplies and ammunition.

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## THE COURSE OF THE BATTLE ON THE EAST BANK IN APRIL

Bad weather throughout April rendered trench digging in the Verdun area most laborious, and the activity of the enemy artillery further tried the endurance of our troops. In the low-lying valleys the ground became a swamp ; trenches filled with water as soon as dug, and operations of any importance were out of the question. The increasing toll of casualties, and especially of sick, began seriously to affect the moral of the survivors.

The Group Commanders' view of the situation was that, if real success were to be achieved, well-constructed jumping-off and assembly trenches, good rearward communications, and a constant supply of fresh reserves were essential, and that only then could the carefully regulated co-operation between infantry and artillery be ensured. Otherwise it seemed useless to pursue any extensive aims. In the meantime our siege artillery were to continue their bombardment of the enemy's forts and batteries, in order to hold down their fire as much as possible ; we had indisputable evidence that this bombardment had hitherto been very effective.

In the air we still maintained undisputed supremacy, thanks to the close co-operation with our airmen of the anti-aircraft guns, which frequently prepared with their fire the advance of our machines to the attack. Under cover of darkness both we and the enemy resorted to bombing raids, which caused considerable damage in the back areas. All the many branches of the air service of the army under my command were under the able direction of Major Haehnelt. The fame of the well-known Lieut.-Colonel Boelcke was already becoming widespread ; at the end of April he scored his fourteenth aerial success by shooting down a hostile machine near Fort Vaux.

The following is a broad outline of the course of operations on the right bank during April :

The general offensive against the Thiaumont-Fleury-Souville-Tavannes line ordered by General von Mudra at the end of March never took place. The French themselves took the initiative of attack on April 2nd, after an intense bombardment on the front of the 121st and 9th R.D.'s. His infantry, advancing in four successive waves, were brought

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to a halt in the Vaux valley by our artillery and machine guns, and a simultaneous push up the slopes of the ravine running north-westwards from Vaux pond was repulsed by General von Gersdorff's 58th Division. Over seven hundred prisoners and a number of machine guns fell into our hands, and the French losses in killed and wounded were known to have been heavy. Between April 2nd and 7th the Eastern Group redistributed its forces. The 10th R.C., now composed of the 113th and 19th R.D.'s, and the 18th Corps (21st and 25th Divisions) relieved the 58th Division in line; the artillery of the latter formation, however, remained in position for the present. On the 5th Reserve Corps sector there was no change.

About ten a.m. on April 3rd, an attack by several hostile regiments in Caillette Wood was repulsed with loss by the 58th Division.

As the result of a conference between the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Armies and my own Chief of Staff at Stenay, the 58th Division was replaced by the 50th Division from the 3rd Army, and we were also promised the Alpine Corps for use on the left wing of the attacking group.

To the west of the 58th Division, which had been relieved by the 21st by April 9th, the left of the 113th Division was with difficulty holding its ground in the sector south of Douaumont fort. It was now replaced by the 25th Division of the 18th Corps. General von Mudra now decided that he must for the moment content himself with a series of gradual and methodical advances by individual divisions. The 113th Division was sent off to the 7th Army, and the corps' sectors on the east bank were redistributed as follows: The 7th R.C. from the Meuse to the line Louvemont-Flabas-Jametz; the 10th R.C. thence to the line Douaumont Fort (inclusive)-Bezonvaux-Longuyon; the 18th Corps thence to the line Vaux valley-Bezonvaux redoubt-Spincourt-Joppécourt; the 5th R.C. as far as Damloup-Eton-Landres, and the 15th Corps to the junction with Strantz's Army Detachment on the line Watronville-Darmont-Fleville.

The system of local advances on a small scale was initiated by the newly-arrived 21st Division of the 18th Corps. On April 11th, after an artillery bombardment, it pushed forward against Caillette wood, but was checked by the hostile barrage, and the new method had for the moment to be recognized as



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a failure. My Chief of Staff, with another Staff officer, therefore, with the consent of Main Headquarters, visited General von Mudra's headquarters at Nouillon Pont, and there spent several days in supervising the preparations for the further offensive by the East Group. A difference of opinion having arisen between him and General von Mudra, the former, on his return on April 15th, urged that a change in the method of attack could only be secured by a change in the command of the Group, and that only thus could we hope to ensure the more rapid progress of operations. He also pointed out quite correctly that an excellent and experienced commander such as General von Mudra could only give of his best if he were assisted not by an improvised staff, but by one regularly organized and accustomed to work together. I myself was quite willing to admit that the conduct of the difficult operations in the Argonne could not be better carried on than by being left entirely in the experienced hands of General von Mudra; and after consultation with Main Headquarters, that General was replaced in his former position at the head of the Argonne Corps, the command of the Eastern Group being assumed by General von Lochow and the staff of the 3rd Corps.

On April 17th there took place the first offensive under the auspices of the new régime; the 7th R.C. also took part in the operation. The 13th R.D. (General von Kühne) took the trenches north and north-west of the quarries on Powre hill, and on the 19th secured the quarries themselves. Further to the east the 19th R.D. and the 18th Corps occupied the ridge between Albain and the Thiaumont ravine as far as the farm of that name; the Hanoverian and Lower Saxon troops particularly distinguished themselves, and brought in fifteen hundred prisoners. Meanwhile, however, the 21st Division, which had been much weakened by recent severe losses, had been unable to maintain all their gains in face of enemy counter-attacks. We had, therefore, to undertake further reliefs. The 5th R.C., which had only four battalions left in the front line, was reinforced by the 50th Division, and the 1st Division replaced the 121st, which was withdrawn to Metz.

On April 20th the 25th Division resumed—without much success—its operations against the north-western portion of Caillette wood. Continual bombing and close-range fighting on the whole front were beginning to take their toll in increasing



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exhaustion of our troops. I was now convinced, after the stubborn to and fro contest for every foot of ground which had continued throughout the whole of April, that although we had more than once changed our methods of attack, a decisive success at Verdun could only be assured at the price of heavy sacrifices, out of all proportion to the desired gains. I naturally came to this conclusion only with the greatest reluctance; it was no easy matter for me, the responsible commander, to abandon my dreams of hope and victory! I examined the whole matter very closely, on the chance that my new outlook might have its origin in my own weakness of heart or irresolution; but the result of it all was only to confirm me in my convictions, and to cause me to reveal them in the innermost circles of my own Operations Staff. I found that, with one exception, they were all of my opinion, more or less. That exception was my Chief of Staff. When I discussed the matter with him he repeatedly reminded me that General von Falkenhayn had always been of his opinion, that the only thing now was not to be prematurely discouraged and not to abandon the struggle until victory had been won. Neither of us succeeded in convincing the other; as often happens in these questions of high strategy and tactics, conflict of temperaments caused us to see things from entirely different points of view.

That General von Falkenhayn saw eye to eye with my Chief of Staff in this matter was forcibly borne in upon me when the latter, on April 21st, informed me, much to my surprise, that my senior General Staff Officer, who had been with me since the outbreak of war, and had the full confidence both of myself and General von Knobelsdorf, had been relieved of his post. Lieutenant-Colonel von Heymann, whose conspicuous services and excellent qualities were fully recognized, was given command of the 2nd Regiment of Foot Guards. At the time when he was relieved he had worked out his scheme for a grand attack to be pressed home on both banks of the Meuse simultaneously with strong forces provided with ample reserves, and was confident of its immediate and complete success. The policy of small local pushes, unsupported by troops echeloned in rear, had been proved unsound. Colonel von Heymann had on more than one occasion expressed his dislike for these numerous partial attacks with limited

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objectives, on the ground that they were without result, and used up more troops than would have been required for an offensive on a great scale.

The loss of this experienced assistant was a matter of deep regret for more than one reason. In the course of many months I had learnt to appreciate his worth as a staff officer and as a man of the highest qualities. The strong will of my Chief of Staff had more than once led to differences between us, which Lieutenant-Colonel von Heymann, with unfailing tact and sympathy, had always managed to compose. I felt his departure very deeply.

Colonel Count Schulenburg, then Chief of Staff of the Guard Corps, and later of my Army Group, took Heymann's place. He also soon began to urge on General von Knobelsdorf the necessity for a cessation of the attack. The 18th Corps, exhausted by constant fighting with varying success, had once more to be relieved, and Main Headquarters placed the divisions of the 3rd Corps at my disposal. General von Lochow, from a more exalted position, was thus able to lead his own well-trying troops to further successes! The 6th Division gradually took over from the inner wings of both divisions of the 18th Corps. On April 24th I conferred with General von Lochow at Nouillon Pont on the situation on the battle front; both he and his Chief of Staff, Major Wetzell, were agreed that the main considerations as regards the further continuance of the offensive must be to secure better initial conditions for the attacks, and to conduct these on a broader front and not as isolated efforts, which were too exposed to outflanking and enveloping fire. Of the 18th Corps only the garrison of Fort Douaumont was now left in position; the 5th and 6th Divisions now in line were under the command of the 10th R.C.

In order to improve our prospects of success in the great combined offensive shortly to be undertaken, my Chief of Staff, after personal negotiations with Main Headquarters, asked for two fresh corps to be utilized, the one to the western, the other to the eastern banks. General von Falkenhayn agreed, and promised these reinforcements; but he refused to allow us to keep the troops that had been relieved within the Army area to be used as reserve in case of necessity; so that our purpose of carrying out regular reliefs at short intervals

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of time, as was done by the French, remained impossible of accomplishment.

### THE COURSE OF THE FIGHTING ON THE WEST BANK IN APRIL AND MAY

During April the fighting on the west bank of the Meuse had on the whole gone well for us. On the 1st the 6th R.C. succeeded in clearing the hostile trenches in the direction of Bethincourt, and following on that, all those north of the stream between that village and Haucourt; these two villages, however, remained in French hands north of the Forges brook until, on April 5th, Haucourt was occupied in a skilful combined operation by the 192nd Regiment. On the left of the 6th R.C. the 22nd R.C. had taken over the sector as far as the Meuse, with its headquarters at Sassey, and a permanent battle position at Brieuilles. Continuous fighting took place daily in the Forges valley in the form of bombing attacks, and despite the weariness of the 11th Reserve and 11th Bavarian Divisions after their weeks of incessant activity, their skilful leadership and dash had by April 7th placed them in possession of their objectives on Fourmeaux hill and the hostile defences east of the road to Esnes, besides 700 prisoners. While they were engaged in dealing with the enemy's attempts to regain his lost trenches, General von Kehler's 12th R.D., on April 9th, continuing its advance according to programme, occupied Bethincourt and the defences to the south-west, and the 22nd R.D. pushed forward its line south of the Mort Homme. On this one day we took over 700 prisoners, and on the next 500 more, with 9 machine guns, and on the 11th a further 200. These figures clearly prove the obstinacy with which the enemy clung to his positions, even after they had been surrounded and their fall was inevitable. We were certainly opposed by a resolute and undaunted foe.

Our divisions melted away fast in these stubborn combats for trenches, which were usually badly damaged by constant rainstorms, and often melted away in the saturated ground; yet once more a series of reliefs had to be undertaken. First the 192nd Brigade and the 11th Bavarian Division, then the 11th and 12th R.D.'s were withdrawn from line, and the 22nd R.D., which had lost a good proportion of its officers, urgently

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required rest ; for the moment, however, we were unable to relieve it.

Meanwhile, on April 22nd, General von Runckel's 43rd R.D. of the 6th R.C. after three hours' artillery preparation, undertook an offensive which at first met with considerable success. The effect of our fire had, however, been unequal, owing to difficulties of observation ; and the sodden ground made it difficult for the infantry either to advance rapidly or to consolidate their gains. Further preparation had to be undertaken in view of the state of the weather and the terrain. General von Gallwitz placed the newly-arrived 4th Division at the disposal of the 22nd Corps, and on April 24th a fresh bombardment was opened against the north-eastern peak of Hill 304. In order to minimize as far as possible the effects of the hostile fire from south-west and south-east, the direction of the attack was to be due north and south, and in order to secure unity of command, the sector of the 12th R.D. was placed under the control of the 22nd Corps. This division, together with the 11th R.D., was gradually relieved and sent to rest in the Diedenhofen area. Before our offensive could take place, however, the French, on the evening of April 29th, delivered a powerful attack on the whole front of the 22nd R.C. from the Mort Homme to north of Les Caurettes ; and in the former area they gained some success, throwing back the right regiment of the 44th Reserve Division. This important ground, which it was vital for us to retain, was recaptured on the morrow by the 207th and 208th Regiments.

From now onwards till well into May, the fighting on the west bank turned on the possession of the Mort Homme and Hill 304 north of Esnes. The advance of the 4th Division against the former went on from May 4th to 8th, and ended in the occupation of the hill and its retention despite all the efforts of the enemy, which were repulsed with heavy loss, including 1,500 prisoners alone. The whole operation had been carried out in a manner reflecting great credit on the division concerned ; it was commanded by my old instructor in tactics, General Freyer, who thus proved that his practice was every whit as good as his theory. In this sector of the western bank there now set in a period of local fighting. On May 15th and again on the 18th, we beat off well-prepared hostile assaults on Hill 304, which was now garrisoned by General



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Schulltheiss' 38th Division, in place of the 4th. The neighbouring 54th Division, which had relieved the 11th Reserve Division, made use of this opportunity to capture 200 men and several machine guns in an advance on either side of the Haucourt-Esnes road.

In conjunction with the main action on Hill 304, the famous 11th Bavarian Division, on May 8th, stormed a series of enemy trenches on Fourmeaux hill, and the 11th Reserve, prior to its relief by the 54th, made progress as far as the southern edge of Camard wood. On May 13th, the 24th R.C. commander, General von Gerok, assumed command of the 54th and 38th Divisions, in the right sector of the Western Group, in place of the 6th Reserve Corps.

In the left sector the 43rd and 44th Reserve Divisions of the 22nd Reserve Corps, on May 20th, stormed the crest of the Mort Homme and the trench system around it in a magnificent attack, and took over 1,300 prisoners. I was fortunate enough to be an eye-witness of this fine feat of arms from near the battle position of the Corps Commander in Forges wood. The intense barrage fire of our artillery sweeping the whole slope of the hill was at once a magnificent and awe-inspiring sight; the "Mort Homme" flamed like a volcano, and the air and the earth alike trembled at the shock of thousands of bursting shells. As zero hour was reached, and punctually to the very minute our barrage lifted, and through my glasses I could clearly observe our skirmishers leave their trenches and move steadily forward; here and there I could even distinguish the smoke puffs of bursting bombs. Close behind followed reserves, carrying parties and entrenching companies. How were things going? Then from the French trenches were to be seen streaming back to our lines, first a few prisoners here and there, then more and more, and at last whole columns of them; I breathed freely once more! There followed a perceptible pause. My Chief of Staff, who had been following the progress of the attack from a more distant position in Consenvoye wood on the eastern bank, telephoned to me that the attack had failed and that everywhere our men could be seen falling back. I was able to correct him; what he had seen were the crowds of prisoners! It is clear from this incident how easy it is even for skilled observers to make mistakes in their reports. General von



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Falkenhayn, the Commander of the 22nd R.C., my first military tutor in my boyhood's days, was delighted at the striking success of his troops. Since the battle of Montfaucon in September, 1914, I had never been able to see a fight so well and clearly as on this 20th of May, 1916, at the Mort Homme.

A few days later, on May 24th, the 22nd Reserve Division of this same corps took Cumières with 300 prisoners. Several days of to and fro fighting followed, and then the 22nd and 44th Reserve Divisions, in a concentric attack from three sides, completed the capture of the line Mort Homme-south edge of Caurette wood-Cumières, taking 1,300 prisoners. We had thus secured a continuous line on the west bank. General von Gallwitz now ordered the corps to hold their ground and fortify it for the present; the 56th Division was put into line to reinforce the 22nd Reserve Corps.

### INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT FIGHTING ON THE EAST BANK IN MAY

I must now return to describe the events on the eastern bank during May. Our heavy and siege artillery proved themselves good friends to the infantry crouching in their poorly constructed trenches or even sometimes reduced to lying out in the open; and afforded them by their constant activity both material and moral support. Our howitzer and heavy howitzer shells fell freely on Fort Vaux and in Caillette wood, but although the fort's turrets and concrete work were seriously damaged, it was not considered that the moment for its assault had come. General Nivelle conducted the defence by means of counter offensives of ever increasing weight, which we more than once repulsed only with great difficulty. Our preparations for attack on a broad front, therefore, needed to be most carefully and thoroughly worked out; our main concern was with the provision of suitable jumping-off trenches and rearward communications—a task never fully accomplished at Verdun—so as to give our troops a fair chance of getting to grips with the enemy, without too heavy losses. Further reinforcements seemed necessary if we were to be in a position to exploit any opportunities that offered with fresh forces. But we were never, alas! to be so favourably situated; we had to live from hand to mouth, and in May, 1916, we were constantly

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being subjected to French attacks. It must be admitted that Main Headquarters were in much the same case, for it was becoming evident that a hostile offensive on another part of the front was in active preparation.

Thus the thorough and careful work of the staffs of the attacking corps and divisions could not make good the unfavourable conditions in the forward zone, where all the work done in preparing assembly and communication trenches was as quickly undone by the hostile artillery. The front line troops, constantly engaged in bombing at close range, sought shelter in shell holes and rifle pits, thus rendering the tasks of issuing orders for a massed attack and the provision of food and ammunition possible only under cover of darkness, and then only partially so. The setting of the sun brought no rest but rather increased fire activity! Carrying parties, with food, trench material and bombs, had to pick their painful way along the least dangerous paths, losing heavily if they failed to find them. Shells and bombs wreaked their havoc miles behind the front lines, among the masses of men and horses bivouacked in the ruined villages and standing camps; on one occasion sixty horses were killed and many more maimed by a single direct hit.

The severest casualties along the Eastern Group front fell on General von Engelbrechten's 50th Division—one of the bravest and best that ever fought under my command—on the Vaux ridge, and on the troops in the vicinity of Fort Douaumont. Here, one shell from the enemy's latest pattern of heavy guns blew in a tunnel mouth, destroyed one armoured turret and wrecked another.

It is hardly to be wondered at that, in view of these facts, the Commander of the Eastern Group, reporting in full knowledge of his responsibility, declared that the completion of the preparations for the offensive, if carried out as ordered, would take weeks. He was always quite satisfied if, thanks to the splendid devotion of our wonderful signallers, he found himself able to have occasional conversations with his brigade and regimental staffs. His artillery fire orders could seldom be carried out, as communication so often failed, and the French airmen made constant attacks on our observation balloons, shooting down as many as five in one day.

The 7th R.C., on Poivre and Talou hills, on the right of the

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Eastern Group, and its skilfully-led artillery, acted as a connecting link between the Western and Eastern Groups, supporting either by flanking fire as seemed necessary.

The 19th R.D., on the left wing of this corps, was ordered by General von Lochow to advance at the end of April, in conjunction with the 10th Reserve Corps (5th and 6th Divisions) on its left, against the line Thiaumont farm-Caillette wood-Buttes wood and north-west of the Vaux valley. On May 7th, it occupied the farm and took 250 prisoners, but the attack of the two divisions of the 10th Reserve Corps was betrayed to the enemy by prisoners, and was checked by a heavy barrage fire.

On May 8th, to make matters worse, Thiaumont farm was lost again, and the gallant 19th R.D. had to be relieved by units of the Guard Ersatz Division. A second general attack was arranged for May 13th, after thorough artillery preparation; as, however, this operation was once more postponed a few days beforehand by the Group, I held a conference on this day with the Chiefs of Staff of the Group, Major Wetzell, and of the 10th Reserve Corps, Lieutenant-Colonel Hoffmann von Waldau, and the latter stated bluntly that the centre division (the 5th), after its previous failures and further heavy losses through a direct hit on Douaumont Fort, was incapable of further effort. Moreover, defective observation and the formation of the terrain rendered matters so difficult for the artillery that they were not in a position adequately to prepare the attack. Finally, Major Wetzell appeared to be none too confident in the possibility of success with the limited forces then available. I then explained, in the clearest possible manner, that we were only bound to attack if leaders and troops were fully confident of success; and this view was also expressed by my Chief of Staff. Once more then I ordered that the great offensive should, for the present, be postponed.

My Chief of Staff, under pressure from the new first General Staff Officer, Colonel Count Schulenburg, proposed to me the provisional cessation of all operations, as he did not believe that the results would be worth the probable expenditure of life and material.

This suggestion coincided absolutely with my view, repeatedly expressed, of the uselessness of further attacks; I

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therefore gladly agreed to an effort to obtain the approval of the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Armies for the proposed abandonment of all further operations! General Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, therefore, motored to Mézières, but on his return thence he was, to my surprise and despair, once more imbued with the necessity for a further offensive, basing himself on the fact that we had been allotted a fresh division of the 1st Bavarian Corps by Main Headquarters. This, together with the 7th Reserve Corps and the right wing of the Eastern Group, was to be launched to an attack, which should carry our line beyond Thiaumont redoubt to Froideterre. I exclaimed: "Your Excellency tells me one thing to-day and another to-morrow! I refuse to order the attack! If Main Headquarters order it, I must obey, but I will not do it on my own responsibility!" And, indeed, Main Headquarters shortly afterwards issued instructions for the continuance of the attack on Verdun!

From the military point of view I have good cause to be grateful to General von Knobelsdorf, and despite my frequent personal differences with him, I cannot but freely acknowledge his eminent services and merits. But since the middle of May, 1916, I entirely failed to understand the attitude of mind of a man who could recommend his superior officer to adopt a course for which he himself had only twenty-four hours before refused to make himself responsible. The outcome of his conversation with General von Falkenhayn was the continuance of the offensive and the further wastage of our best troops against the resistance of the enemy, which grew stronger as we approached closer to the fortress.

I could not, of course, but be deeply hurt at this misunderstanding, but my duty as a soldier compelled me to repress my personal sentiments in view of the high opinion of the abilities of General von Knobelsdorf entertained in the highest circles.

### THE FRENCH COUNTER-OFFENSIVE ON THE EASTERN BANK AT THE END OF MAY

Our next objective, then, was to be the Thiaumont redoubt, and its capture was to be regarded as an earnest of our ability to bind victory to the German flag. My Chief of Staff con-



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ferred personally with General von Lochow, and the latter, whose military ability has perhaps never been sufficiently recognized, drew up a plan of attack based on a clear insight into the situation and carefully thought out in every detail. The Group and Corps Commanders, in consultation with the Generals of Artillery and the Commanders of the trench-mortar units, were to take careful measures for the most effective artillery preparation for the subsequent advance of the infantry. Further conferences based on this project took place at the battle headquarters of the 7th Reserve and 10th Reserve Corps, at which the details of execution were thoroughly thrashed out. The resulting instructions were then sent to me for approval by the Corps Commanders. The third Regiment of the Guard Ersatz Division, hitherto held back in reserve, was now placed at the disposal of the 10th Reserve Corps.

On May 16th General von Falkenhayn, in person, visited my Army Headquarters to discuss with me at length the further course of operations on my front. I now became quite clear in my own mind as to the agreement between him and General von Knobelsdorf. The attack now projected, with the aid of the promised reinforcements, was to be only a prelude to a further offensive on a great scale. Directions in this sense were therefore issued to all higher leaders on the eastern bank, together with certain alterations in the organization of the commands.

The preparations for our attack were thus pressed on under the heavy fire of artillery on either side, when the hostile bombardment, on May 22nd, suddenly increased to drum-fire on the whole front, from Fort Vaux to the Meuse. The 1st Division repelled the ensuing attack from the parapet of the fort ; but the violence of the enemy's onslaught forced back the 10th Reserve Corps for some considerable distance. The 5th Division was driven as far as the outskirts of Fort Douaumont, and it seemed likely at one time that the work itself must be lost ; the 19th Reserve and 6th Divisions, on either flank of the 5th, also had to give ground for a time ; but the 5th Division rallied, and in a fierce counter-offensive recovered its former positions. Village and fort were once more securely in our hands by nightfall. Throughout the whole of May 23rd and 24th the battle raged incessantly around Fort Douaumont,



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and particularly on the south-eastern and south-western edges, where both sides suffered heavily. With the arrival of the 2nd Bavarian Division, under General von Hartz, the 10th R.C. managed to gain the upper hand and to muster up sufficient strength to throw back the weakening enemy. Thus at the close of this day of bitter fighting the Eastern Group remained in full possession of its old positions, and had also succeeded in clearing the whole of Thiaumont Wood in co-operation with the 19th R.D. Over two thousand prisoners were secured, but our own casualties were also heavy. Much against our will, we had to resign ourselves to withdrawing from Thiaumont Farm and its vicinity, in view of the confusion of our troops, our ignorance of the country and the lack of artillery support.

The 1st Bavarian Corps, under General von Xylander, whose troops had so effectively intervened at the critical moment, was now put into line between the 7th Reserve and 10th Reserve Corps. The 19th Reserve Division, which was to be relieved in part by the 1st Bavarian Division (General von Schoch), and the 5th Division, shortly to be replaced by the 2nd Bavarian Division, were placed under its command. The 7th Reserve Corps, now under General von Lochow's Eastern Group, still retained the 13th and 14th R.D.'s, and the 10th Reserve Corps the 7th R.D. (to be relieved by the 6th) and the 1st Division.

This new distribution of forces required time in the extremely difficult conditions of the moment. The definite order that the attack was still to be undertaken, but only after careful and thorough preparation, was, of course, still in force.

The 30th and 39th Divisions of the 15th Corps, which for months past had stubbornly maintained their positions in the Woivre plain, overlooked by the enemy on the heights in every direction, were constantly suffering loss from gas and chemical shelling; but the co-operation of their artillery was of the utmost value on the decisive battle-field. The constancy of the infantry in holding on to their exposed positions at the foot of the heights of the Meuse, therefore, deserves the fullest recognition.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE BATTLE FROM JUNE TO AUGUST, 1916

#### THE POSITION ON THE WEST BANK IN JUNE

IT is not possible for me, within the limits of these chapters on the Battle of Verdun, to do more than touch briefly on the achievements of my brave troops. Even where they were not actually engaged in the main battle, they endured with stubborn heroism the effects of its reaction on the neighbouring sectors of the front, evinced usually in the form of increased artillery activity both by day and by night. On the 18th R.C. front, on our extreme right, west of the Argonne, the hotly contested Briqueterie position and Cannon hill were regularly subjected to heavy bursts of shell and machine-gun fire ; but all enemy attacks were victoriously repulsed. The important railway junctions of Challerange and Autry in our back areas were also frequently bombarded by long-range artillery.

At the beginning of June, 1916, the 16th A.C. was the only unit left under my command of all the corps and divisions which had formed my Army at the beginning of the war ; and this formation was still holding the front in and east of the Argonne as far as Vauquois heights. The intense mining and patrol activity in this sector were clear evidence that the offensive spirit still remained unimpaired on the right wing of my army. The unceasing thunder of the artillery on the battlefield was frequently accompanied by the roar of mine explosions, either our own or the enemy's, the inevitable prelude to intense hand to hand fighting for the possession of the craters. On June 26th I once more saw the intrepid leader of the Argonne Corps, General von Mudra, at Buzaney, whither he had proceeded after handing over his previous command and had gladly taken up his former duty. East of Vauquois the 2nd Landwehr Division, with the 192nd Brigade, under General Franke, held the line through Cheppy wood.

## The Battle from June to August, 1916

According to the instructions of Main Headquarters, General von Gallwitz's Western Group found its sphere of activity still further restricted. Simultaneous operations on both banks could no longer be undertaken with our limited resources, and the greatest importance was attached to the advance on the east bank. Both Main Headquarters and my own Army Staff—from the information available as to enemy distribution and wastage—were struck by the extremely rapid reliefs of the various French divisions engaged. It was not to be understood from this that all the formations thus taken out of line were of necessity exhausted; the great number of French divisions available for use at need permitted the deliberate adoption of this policy. Beyond a doubt our divisions were kept longer in the line, but when they were finally taken out, they were at an end of their strength!

Owing to the predominant importance of the east bank, the Western Group had to assist its neighbours as far as possible, by handing over 6 heavy howitzer and 12 howitzer batteries, and by holding down with its fire the enemy battery groups on the western side of the river which were enfilading the opposite bank. The most important of these groups were in position in Bourrus wood, south of the Marre ridge and near Forts Chaume and Sartes. The roads leading to Verdun from the south-west were also commanded from the west bank, and were heavily shelled as soon as the bubbling caldron of battle began to simmer up once more to boiling-point.

The fighting soldier, generally speaking, is too obsessed by his own needs and perils to have much time to spare for consideration of the general military situation. About the end of the month, however, reports of two magnificent victories in other theatres of war arrived in good time to put new heart into our men on the Verdun front, as elsewhere. One of these reports told us of the splendid initial success of the Austrians in Italy, where they had pushed forward in and east of the Adige valley as far as Arsiero and Asiago, capturing 30,000 prisoners and over 300 guns. Shortly after we heard news of the great sea battle between the Skagerrack and Jutland, in which the magnificent leading, training and manœuvring ability of our High Sea Fleet won us our first great naval success, deprived the English squadrons of some of their best warships, and dealt a serious blow at British naval prestige! What

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gave these two successes their peculiar importance from the moral point of view, and filled with gratification every German soldier on the Western front, was the fact that each had been gained by forces from which we had hitherto learned to expect little in the way of decisive aid in our struggle for victory.

In accordance with the directive for the Western Groups, which ordered that the line reached in May should be advanced by local operations only, General von Watter's 54th Division of the 24th R.C., on June 3rd, reduced several enemy redoubts by sapping forward against them; but the impossibility of rapidly digging in the rocky soil caused the failure of every attempt to maintain these gains. By June 9th both the 54th and 29th Divisions of the 24th R.C. were back in their old positions. To the left of them the three divisions of the 22nd R.C. were hard pressed by the repeated efforts of the French to drive them from their positions on the "Mort Homme" plateau. During the night of June 1st we were forced out of some 250 yards of ground in the trench system on the south-western slope; but all the French efforts to exploit this local success westward of the Haucourt-Esnes road, were checked by our barrage fire. It was now time to relieve, once for all, the highly-tried divisions of the 22nd R.C., and only the 56th Division, under General von Wichmann, was left in position on the right wing. The 14th Division relieved the 22nd, in the centre, and the 13th the 44th Reserve, on the left; and in the middle of June General von François, commanding the 7th A.C., whose two divisions were already in line, took over from the 22nd R.C.

It was proposed with these fresh troops to secure our hold on the bitterly-contested Mort Homme, by means of an attack on Chattancourt. Meanwhile, the Western Group saw the enemy batteries on its front increasing in number daily at the very time when its own artillery was being weakened for the benefit of the Eastern Group. Once more, on June 14th, our lines on the Mort Homme were attacked and trenched; this time the counter-offensive, which was at once set in motion, failed to regain the whole of the lost ground, and we had to content ourselves with the capture of 250 prisoners and a few machine-guns. Renewed enemy attacks on June 16th were successfully repelled, but all our own attempts to improve our line proved equally vain in face of the effective enemy fire. From



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now onwards both sides resigned themselves to a defensive attitude on the west bank of the Meuse.

### THE SUCCESSFUL OFFENSIVE ON THE EAST BANK AT THE BEGINNING OF JUNE

On the other bank of the Meuse the month opened auspiciously. The great offensive, which had been carefully prepared long beforehand for June 1st, took place in the sectors of the two centre corps, the 1st Bavarian and 10th Reserve, and was supported by the artillery of the 7th R.C. on the right, and the 15th A.C. on the left. The Bavarians, south-west of Douaumont, stormed one permanent battery with dugouts for infantry; the 7th R.D. cleared Caillette wood, and the 1st Division the crests north-west of Fort Vaux. The two last-named formations then pressed forward over the Vaux valley and established themselves on the northern slopes in Vaux Chapitre and Fumin woods. For once the enclosed country favoured our gallant infantry by screening them from hostile observation; as against our small total of casualties we had by evening secured over 2,000 prisoners, several guns and many machine-guns. The hot fighting of the day was followed by a night of activity, devoted to the construction of shelter for the infantry in the newly-won trenches and the organization of new barrage zones. All of this had to be completed before daybreak. The intense shelling of the French artillery on the 2nd was very effective, and one heavy shell caused serious damage to a machine-gun turret and an armoured observation post on Fort Douaumont, the one secure refuge for our reserves.

The gallant 50th Division of the 15th A.C. followed up the success of the 10th Reserve Corps by capturing Damloup and a portion of Fort Vaux. French infantry, covered by intense artillery fire, advanced, on June 3rd, against our new trenches, which in some places had been entirely blown in; the attack, which extended along the whole front of the 1st Bavarian and 10th R.C., was none the less everywhere repulsed. Fort Vaux was occupied bit by bit by three companies of the 158th Regiment, under the enterprising leadership of Lieutenant Rackow, the French garrison below being closely invested in the tunnels. From the General commanding the 15th A.C. I heard the most astonishing stories of heroism in the fighting around this fort. It is difficult to form a just idea of the extra-



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ordinary gallantry of our troops. It must be realized that the French occupied forts carefully sited so as to secure flanking fire on all sides, and that their observers were everywhere in safe shelter; yet, despite all this, our infantry supports in the course of these costly and useless hostile attacks often made hundreds of prisoners! It must be admitted, for all this, that the French infantry also invariably fought gallantly and with great resolution.

During the course of the next few days attack and counter-attack succeeded each other without pause on the 10th R.C. front. The renowned 1st East Prussian Division, under General von Conta, made repeated attempts to improve its line north-west of Fort Vaux, and the enemy exhausted himself in desperate but vain endeavours to regain the ground in Chapitre and Fumin woods, conquered by this and the equally famous 7th R.D. of General Count Schwerin. On June 6th alone the French, after a lavish expenditure of ammunition, attacked the 1st Division's positions no less than four times; and in thirty-six hours nine hostile attacks were repulsed by this formation, although its positions and rearward communications in the vicinity of Hardaumont were entirely obliterated! Finally, on the morning of June 7th, we gained another great and conspicuous success; after several vain attempts to relieve it had failed, the French garrison blockaded in the galleries of Fort Vaux laid down its arms! Its five hundred gallant men, who for six days had had no communication with the outer world save by pigeons, had exhausted their food supplies and been compelled to surrender with all their material.

This strong post, which had cost us so much to capture, had to be secured at once against flanking fire from the enemy trenches in the neighbourhood. Here was no matter for mere empty rejoicing; this victory, like every other, involved fresh heavy sacrifices if we were to hold what we had won. On the 8th, therefore, the 1st and 50th Divisions attacked in a south-easterly direction from the fort, and the Bavarians, on their right, south-west of Douaumont. Ten minutes before the hour fixed for our attack, at 4 p.m., the French assaulted the front held by the 10th R.C. The 1st Division repulsed them and drove them back some hundreds of yards. In the Bavarian sector their 2nd Division, supported by parts of the Alpine Corps, got to within a hundred metres of Thiaumont

## The Battle from June to August, 1916

farm and brought in fifteen hundred prisoners. Repeated French efforts to recapture Fort Vaux during the next few days proved fruitless, while on our side the 1st Division succeeded in capturing an enemy strong point and its neighbouring trenches with large quantities of material.

Unhappily there now ensued a period during which our operations before Verdun were once more disadvantageously affected by the general military situation. Brussilow's great and successful offensive against the Austrian southern front in Galicia and on the Stry in June resulted in enormous captures of prisoners and material. The Austrians lost whole units, largely of Czech nationality, by desertion to the enemy, and in the first moment of the disaster completely lost their heads—commanders and troops alike. The German High Command had no choice but to despatch further troops and munitions in large quantities to the Eastern front, in order to rescue our wavering Allies. The military situation of Austria was rendered the more acute by the simultaneous Italian offensive astride the Brenta; while, as regards Germany, a powerful hostile offensive against our weakened front in the West was becoming increasingly probable. Finally, intense anxiety was felt as to the future action of Rumania, which lay so close to our frontier.

Main Headquarters, therefore, compelled by the necessities of the situation, decided to give up the idea of a further offensive against Verdun, not altogether, but pending the liberation of additional forces. The positions as held were to be fortified so as to economize men as much as possible, and our troops were to be echeloned in depth until such time as further reinforcements and large supplies of Green Cross gas shell should be available for use in another attack. As it happened, during the course of the next few days, the 4th Division arrived and was placed in Army reserve behind the Western and Eastern Groups, and the 103rd Division also became available in the L. of C. area. The purpose of this voluntary cessation of the offensive—to allow the troops time for rest and reorganization—was unfortunately hardly fulfilled at all as regards those in the front line, as the initiative lay at least as much with the French as with ourselves, and ever since May 22nd the former had striven unceasingly to make good the loss of Fort Douaumont, which had been a very bitter blow

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to them. In the course of these vain endeavours they had left 7,800 unwounded prisoners, 12 guns and 130 machine-guns in the hands of the Eastern Group, which had also taken advantage of these repulsed attacks to advance its own lines. Thus, on June 12th, the brave 1st Bavarian Corps finally captured the bitterly-contested Honeycomb Trench, near Thiaumont farm; General Krafft von Delmensingen's Alpine Corps captured the farm itself next day, having only that morning taken over the line from the 2nd Bavarian Division.

The repeated orders for the construction of solid defences to ensure greater safety and for the consolidation of an unbroken front prior to further attacks largely remained dead letters; the rocky soil prevented all digging by the troops in certain sectors, and owing to the constant shell-fire they often preferred to lie out in shell-holes unnoticed by the enemy, and to seek such rest and shelter as was possible in the areas least exposed to his guns. My conversations with the commanders of various ranks and units all tended to confirm the exactitude of this picture. General von Mudra, General von Lochow, his successor, in command of the Eastern Group, and General von Gündell, the commander of the 5th R.C., who had had longer experience than any other general on the east bank of the Meuse, were all agreed in affirming that continuous front lines and communication trenches, besides being difficult to construct, afforded much too good a mark for hostile observation and fire. On my visiting the 1st Bavarian Corps at St. Laurent, on June 16th, to congratulate and thank them for their heroic constancy while in the lines, I heard the same tale—that the difficulty of bringing up the necessary material and the destructive effects of the hostile artillery fire, directed, as it was, from covered and concealed observation posts, rendered the construction of regular trench lines a sheer impossibility.

We had, therefore, no alternative but either to pursue the offensive with fresh forces or else to abandon it for good. Both to Main Headquarters and to my own Chief of Staff I urged with all possible emphasis the uselessness of further effort; but still in vain! General von Falkenhayn certainly listened to my remarks most attentively, and promised to carry them to His Majesty, but after consultation with my

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Chief of Staff he invariably decided against my opinion. The Emperor, too, treated me as Crown Prince exactly as he did all the other Army leaders; any communication from me addressed directly to him was sent on in company with other important documents, to be dealt with through the usual channels.

My recollections of these months of battle before Verdun are among the most painful of the whole war. I heard and knew exactly how matters were; I had spoken with too many officers and men to have any illusions as to the truth! I was absolutely opposed to the idea of continuing the attack, yet I had to obey orders. I began to doubt whether the French divisions, owing to their system of rapid reliefs, were suffering much more heavily than were we; this had certainly been the case in the first months of the offensive; now the balance seemed to me to be swaying the other way. How long before this doubt became a certainty! These were difficult and torturing questions for a responsible commander!

### THE CONTINUATION OF THE ATTACK ON THE EAST BANK IN THE SECOND HALF OF JUNE

Although, so far as I could see, the position of affairs at Verdun offered little hope of great or decisive success, we were ordered by Main Headquarters to resume the offensive, after a short period of delay necessitated by the general situation, by putting in the 103rd and 4th Divisions. On June 17th the Eastern Group drew up its orders for the attack, laying great stress on a lavish use of Green Cross gas shell; these orders proposed the capture of Froideterre, Fleury village and Fort Souville. On June 18th the Group was reinforced by the 11th Bavarian Division from Strantz's Army Detachment, on the front of which fighting had almost died away, even on the once hotly-contested heights of Combres.

Thus, after considerable confusion and doubt, caused by the frequent alterations of our plans, my Army was once more working with all its energies to ensure for the infantry in the front line the greatest possible assistance and all facilities in its important future task. Accurate explanatory sketches of the works of Belleville, St. Michel, Souville, Tavannes and La Lauffée were given out, so as to focus all attention on our most distant objectives and even beyond. If these forts



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could be overrun in the surprise of our attack the key to Verdun would be in our hands.

Early on June 21st our artillery opened up, deluging the French battery positions with gas shell. The preparatory attack which followed was carried out by the Alpine Corps and the 7th Reserve, 1st and 50th Divisions; at first, everything went well, but the heavy hostile artillery and machine-gun fire everywhere checked it before the final objectives could be reached. On the whole front the ground in rear of our advancing waves was swept by an impassable belt of fire, which prevented the arrival either of supplies or of reinforcements. We succeeded in repelling all the French counter-attacks, and our artillery set to work to prepare for the main advance. The enemy's reply grew weaker and weaker as the far-reaching effects of our gas shelling became more manifest. On June 23rd, shortly after dawn, only a few batteries here and there on either bank of the Meuse were firing at extreme range. The infantry of the 103rd Division, under General von Estorff, which had relieved the 7th Reserve Division, left their trenches at 6 a.m., and were followed two hours later by the divisions of the 1st Bavarian Corps on their right, and the 50th Division on their left.

The Bavarians overran the Thiaumont redoubt in the first rush, and forced their way on to the ridge and close up to the redoubt of Froideterre. The Alpine Corps, on their left, in conjunction with the Bavarian Leib Regiment, stormed the fortified village of Fleury and pressed on beyond it. To the left again, the 103rd Division, in Chapitre wood, secured several hostile trenches, but were held up, together with the 1st Division, in the wooded ravines, which were all swept by enemy machine-gun fire. Fort Souville was still far out of reach! On the left wing the 50th Division finally got possession of the enemy defences south of Fort Vaux. All the French counter-strokes from the front Fleury-Souville were beaten off. Prince Henry of Bavaria, in command of a battalion of the Leib regiment, greatly distinguished himself during the assault on Fleury. A few days later, when King Ludwig was visiting my headquarters at Stenay, I heard by chance that he had been wounded, but, to our great relief, not seriously; he had only been buried by a shell. This gallant young prince of the House of Wittelsbach was killed later in Rumania.



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So serious did the French believe the situation to be in the period following this attack, that they began to withdraw all their batteries in the Bras-Froideterre sector. Four thousand prisoners remained in our hands as trophies of success. The next few days were spent by the enemy in repeated and desperate but vain efforts to recover the lost ground, and by us in preparations for another attack which should widen the breach we had driven in the enemy's lines. Our use of gas shell had prepared our way to victory ; and it seemed that we had now a good chance of decisive success.

### THE EFFECT OF THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME ON THE POSITION OF VERDUN

But, in the very midst of my satisfaction at these important successes, there came serious and menacing news. On June 24th, while I was visiting Imperial Headquarters, His Majesty informed me of the anxiety felt by Main Headquarters as to the enemy's imminent offensive against the Second Army, which had been long in preparation and was expected to be most formidable. To meet it we should need all reserves not yet sent to the East. My fears were realized, for, on this very day, the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Armies telegraphed to my Army : "The general situation makes it necessary to reduce drastically the expenditure of men, material and munitions in the Group of Armies." He asked for our proposals as to how this object could be secured once we had established a firm front by the capture of Thiaumont battery, Fleury, and the area forward of Fort Vaux.

Any serious reduction of my forces would necessitate the breaking off of the offensive, and even, if necessary, a withdrawal to a line further in rear, trusting to our assured ascendancy over the enemy and the moral and material effects of our Green Cross shell to hold back his pursuit. But my Chief of Staff, imbued with all the offensive tradition of Old Prussia, and strong-willed as ever, considered that our course of action should be discussed with General von Falkenhayn ; and, as usual, the decision was that we should continue our offensive. Orders were also issued that the 10th R.C. and the 13th R.C. of my Group should change places. It appeared to me almost as a jest of fate when I read in our written project these words :

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“Our successes on the eastern bank have driven back the enemy to within closer and closer range of Verdun and compelled him to put in his last reserves. It is, therefore, proposed to continue the offensive with the forces at our disposal. Any individual formations which suffer heavy losses in these operations will be relieved from within the Group of Armies.”

For the moment, however, we were not in a position to endeavour to carry out this intention ; for the enemy counter-attacked incessantly with the object of recovering the lost ground, and compelled us to take special measures to ensure its retention by counter-battery work against the most active of the hostile artillery groups and by careful regulation of our barrage. The 2nd Bavarian Division relieved the 1st on June 27th, and it was also proposed to replace the 19th Reserve by the 25th Reserve, and the 1st by the 21st Reserve. The French infantry, acting in the spirit of an order found on the battlefield which stated : “The country, in the interests of the general situation, demands that the lost ground be recaptured if it costs us our last breath,” wore itself out in repeated and costly counter-strokes, all of which broke down before the well-directed and timely barrage of the artillery in the sector attacked, assisted by flanking support from neighbouring batteries.

We, therefore, entered upon the month of July with the intention of resuming the offensive, while yet we were compelled to devote all our energies repelling hostile attacks of the most determined kind. Meantime, far to the north-west, there had raged for some days past such a drumfire as had never yet fallen on any German front, and on July 1st the long-expected Franco-British offensive, utilizing every possible weapon of attack both on the land and in the air, opened on both sides of the Somme between Gommecourt and Chaulnes. On this very date, while my Army Headquarters Staff was engaged in drawing up special instructions for the use of flammenwerfer and for the improvement of communications, and I myself was visiting the General Commanding the Alpine Corps at Chaumont, to express my special gratitude for the gallant behaviour of his troops, there arrived from Main Headquarters the first urgent instructions for help to be sent to the Second Army. We were to place two divisions at the disposal

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of the High Command and to report what further reserves we could provide by the adoption of the strictest economy of force in the front lines.

Despite the increased activity of the enemy, who was, of course, bound to try and prevent by every possible means the dispatch of our reserves to the Somme, I personally reported to Imperial Headquarters in Mézières, on July 2nd, that the 4th and 21st Reserve Divisions were available; the latter was already being relieved by the 7th Reserve Division in the 18th A.C. area. Hostile activity now began to manifest itself on my whole Army front. In the 26th A.C. sector in the Argonne he surprised us with the aid of new liquid fire trench mortar bombs, which he employed at Vauquois with such powerful charges that even his own trenches were damaged, and everywhere, on both banks of the Meuse, there broke out heavy bombing fights intended to hold our forces to their ground and distract our attention from the main action on the Somme. We also did our best to pin down the enemy and to bring relief to the hard-pressed Second Army by these means, as well as by detaching to its assistance all the troops we could spare.

On July 4th I was able to report to my father in Mézières the successful capture of the Damloup battery by the 99th (Zabern) Regiment. This local success was again followed by violent French counter-blows against the 1st Bavarian, 15th Reserve and 10th Reserve Corps; vain as they were, they certainly incommoded our preparations for the great offensive which still formed part of our plans. The 25th Reserve Division exchanged with the 19th Reserve in the 1st Bavarian Corps areas, and passed to the 6th R.C., which now disposed of the 14th, 13th and 25th Reserve Divisions. Apart from the activity of the enemy, the unusually bad weather, which set in about the middle of the summer and prevented all observation of fire, several times compelled us to postpone the opening of our artillery preparation.

### THE OFFENSIVE ON THE EASTERN BANK IN THE FIRST HALF OF JULY

The High Command now insisted repeatedly and with urgency that we should at once carry out the attack on Fort Souville and then send off to the Somme the available artillery

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from all Corps sectors on the East bank. I realized that this was to be our last effort against Verdun. If successful, it would perhaps prevent the enemy, whom we believed would then be held fast to his ground, from detaching any more heavy batteries from the Verdun fronts ; if unsuccessful, it meant, so far as I could see, in view of the general situation in the East and in the West, the end of the Verdun drama. All possible energy was now devoted to the aim of securing such a victorious termination to the battle. In view of the preponderating importance of an accurate and effective preliminary bombardment, the views of our artillery officers of all ranks were collated and published for the information of all concerned. His Majesty asked me, on July 9th, the eve of the opening of our bombardment, when we were together on the observation platform at my Army Headquarters, what were my views as to the forthcoming offensive. It was the only one about to be undertaken anywhere in any theatre of war ! Everywhere else the enemy had wrested from us the initiative, and our operations were further circumscribed by strict orders to economize artillery ammunition and to dispatch all available gas shells to the Second Army. The increased expenditure on other fronts limited our own stocks, while the enemy had behind them the resources of the whole world. I must confess that in these days I had need of all my resolution to repress the doubts that obsessed me and show a calm and undisturbed front to the outer world.

On July 10th, to the thundering accompaniment of our artillery preparation, reduced in intensity only on the extreme outer flanks of the Verdun front, I reviewed at Vitarville the veteran troops of the Guard Ersatz Division, commanded by the distinguished General von Larisch, which was earmarked as reserve to the Eastern Group. Following on the opening of our Green Cross shell bombardment, favoured by a north-west wind, the enemy retaliated against our batteries with gas shell, but failed to disturb our carefully planned shooting, which was admirably seconded by the artillery from the west bank. Our infantry debouched at 5.45 a.m. on the 11th, their main weight being directed against Fort Souville and the trenches to the east of it. South of Fleury, where the Alpine Corps fought, supported by the 10th R.C., we gained ground to a depth of four hundred yards in a magnificent attack ; but further to the



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left the 103rd and 1st Divisions were soon held up in Chapitre and Fumin woods. To the left again the 50th Division secured some trenches south of Fort Vaux as far as the Tavannes valley on the Lauffée ridge. A total of 2,400 prisoners was reported that evening. On the whole, however, our high hopes had been once more disappointed, despite the powerful efforts we had put forward to attain our objectives, and the large resources at our disposal.

On one point, at least, my last lingering doubts were now resolved. In this "hell of Verdun" even the bravest troops were simply incapable of maintaining for any length of time the high morale necessary for a successful offensive. Even from the psychological point of view there must be a limit to human endurance, and failure to recognize this merely meant that one was overstraining the springs of nature. If this were true of the flower of our soldiers, how much more so in the case of men of weaker moral fibre, who could no longer sustain themselves with any belief in victory? The mill on the Meuse ground to powder the hearts as well as the bodies of the troops.

These views at last began to find acceptance even with General von Falkenhayn. On July 11th he once more gave me verbal instructions that "as the objectives of to-day's attack have not been reached despite the lavish use of Green Cross shell and other material, the Crown Prince's Group of Armies will henceforward adopt a defensive attitude." The Bavarians and the 103rd and 1st Divisions had, however, before these instructions could be passed on to the divisional staffs and fighting troops, endeavoured with unsurpassable heroism to resume their vain attacks, but with no better success than before.

It seems probable that the situation on the Somme was in part responsible for the change in General von Falkenhayn's attitude. The removal of material from the Army Group area and the changes in the composition of the commands, which were taken in hand as soon as the offensive had come to an end, were clear evidence of this. The 1st Bavarian Corps relieved the 3rd Bavarian Corps in Strantz's Army Detachment, which then sent the 6th Division to the 5th Army, and the 5th, with the corps headquarters, to the Somme. General von Höhn, of the 6th Bavarian Division, took over the 1st

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Bavarian Corps' sector with his own and the 4th Division. The Headquarters Staff of the Western Group was also sent off to the Somme front to take charge of the new 1st Army south of the river, and also to command a new Gallwitz's Group of Armies, to include that army and the 2nd to the north of it. The 56th Division from the 7th Corps and nine batteries of light howitzers, several battalions of heavy artillery, and three flame-thrower companies from the eastern bank were also dispatched in quick succession. General von Briesse's 21st Reserve and the Guard Ersatz Divisions relieved the worn-out 1st and 103rd Divisions respectively, and the oft-discussed exchange of sectors between the 18th R.C. and 10th R.C. at last took place. General von François assumed command of the Western Group in place of General von Gallwitz.

By July 18th the Army had been reorganized as follows : West of the Argonne the 10th R.C. (7th Reserve, 19th Reserve and 9th Landwehr Divisions).

The 16th A.C., much weakened by detachments, but otherwise as originally organized, and the 2nd Landwehr Division.

The Meuse Eastern Group, comprising the 24th R.C. (192nd, 54th and 38th Divisions) and the 7th A.C. (14th and 13th Divisions).

The Meuse Western Group, under General von Lochow, consisting of the 6th R.C. (14th, 13th and 20th Reserve Divisions), Höhn's Group (4th and 6th Bavarian Divisions), and the 18th R.C. (Guard Ersatz and 21st Reserve Divisions).

The 15th A.C., organized as before (50th, 30th and 39th Divisions).

During my frequent journeys to Imperial Headquarters at Mézières to obtain news as to the general situation, I visited the battle positions of the various staffs, and received reports from the commanding generals at my own headquarters. All were firmly convinced that the events of July must exercise a decisive influence on the military and political situation.

Our heroic troops meantime successfully repulsed all attacks on the Thiaumont redoubt, and we gained the impression that the French also were economizing their munitions as far as possible for the benefit of their Somme offensive. Thus, in the middle of July, activity at Verdun died down, and my Chief of Staff was thereby spurred on to reopen the question of the resumption of our attack, with the idea—in itself quite justifi-

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able—of weakening the hostile efforts on their offensive front. As early as July 23rd, only twelve days after the order had been issued for a “strict defensive,” he was discussing the matter at Sorbey with the commanders of the 18th R.C. and of the Eastern Group. However, just then Main Headquarters ordered us to send yet more troops to the Somme, where the battle was resolving itself into a series of fierce local combats ; we, therefore, organized a mixed division from the 10th R.C. and 16th A.C., and attached a brigade from the Western Group. The south-eastern theatre of war also was constantly appealing for more troops from our reserves, and at the same time our original impression that the enemy, too, was growing weaker was shown to be inaccurate. His efforts raged unceasingly round Thiaumont work, which more than once changed hands. The 4th Division lost so heavily there that it had to be relieved by the 14th from the west bank. In this latter area only the 41st Regiment of the 1st Division was left in line, as the rest of the division had been hurried off to the East without this regiment.

At this juncture there arose fresh differences between myself and my Chief of Staff. The latter, on behalf of Main Headquarters, suddenly informed me of the fact that a new offensive by the Eastern Group was in contemplation. The reason alleged was the necessity of deluding the enemy into the belief that we were still persisting in our operations at Verdun, and preventing him from detaching troops to the Somme. Once again Falkenhayn seemed to have reverted to the idea which I believed he had abandoned—of keeping open the bleeding wound in the side of the French Army. As a subordinate officer, despite my own clearly expressed views, I had no choice but to obey my superiors, Main Headquarters, who alone could have the necessary broad outlook for the issue of such orders, for which they were solely responsible. I was surprised, however, that no written instructions were issued, but the whole matter was settled by verbal conversations with my Chief of Staff. Our preparations for the attack, which had been fixed for August 1st, began on July 29th.

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### THE FRENCH COUNTER-OFFENSIVE AT THE BEGINNING OF AUGUST

In this operation the left of General von Möhm's 25th Reserve Division and Höhn's Group made some progress near Froideterre; the Guard Ersatz Division was checked by heavy hostile fire, but the 21st Reserve Division secured only the extremity of the Souville ridge, and the 50th Division captured the batteries. Thus our renewed efforts were, on the whole, unsuccessful, though we held our gains in face of the enemy's counter-attacks. Once more it was proved that the Verdun offensive was at an end. What was the use of the one thousand prisoners and fourteen machine guns we had secured on this day? Our losses, too, had been heavy, and at this very time we were having great difficulty in raising more men at home to complete our wasted reserves! Apart from the usual succession of violent counter-blows in the actual area of the recent fighting, the French penetrated as far as the second line of the 7th R.C. on the western part of Poivre hill, and maintained themselves in the front system, despite our efforts to retake it. Das Leib Regiment, of the Alpine Corps, had to be hurriedly dispatched to Vilosnes to support the right wing of the Eastern Group. Despite the creditable anxiety of the defeated troops to have their revenge as soon as possible, Generals von Zwehl, commanding the 7th R.C., and General von Loeb, commanding the 14th Reserve Division, refused to allow any attempt to retake the lost ground, as they had lost all belief in the possibility of a victorious resumption of the offensive, and rightly placed little faith in the fighting capacity of troops who had been constantly in action for the last five and a half months. The two gallant Westphalian Reserve Divisions, the 13th and 14th, were, in fact, retained in the Verdun sector, under their able and careful commander, the highly-esteemed General von Zwehl, until December—longer than any other troops under my command.

The fierce French attacks culminated on August 3rd in the recapture of Thiaumont redoubt and Fleury village. We retook the redoubt next day, and the village changed hands several times. The 4th and 6th Bavarian Divisions, however, suffered so heavily that the exchange of sectors between the



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former and the 14th Division from the west bank was carried out by August 6th, and the 6th Bavarian Division handed over its line to the 33rd Division of the 16th, on the 8th. In order to strengthen our front, the 2nd Jägers of the Alpine Corps were brought up on lorries to Azannes, and the newly-arrived 14th Bavarian Division was sent to Nouillon Pont. How bitterly the French strove to recapture their chosen objectives will be realized from the fact that from June 23rd onward Thiaumont redoubt was attacked thirty-four times and Fleury village thirteen times.

This state of things induced in the minds of the High Command a belief in a new turn in affairs. It was concluded—to use the words of a message sent to us on August 4th—that “we have now to deal with a second hostile offensive on a large scale against Verdun in conjunction with that on the Somme. We must therefore be prepared for lengthy operations.” With this in view, Strantz’s Army Detachment, which had in front of it only nine enemy divisions, was ordered to place the 33rd Reserve Division at the disposal of my Group of Armies. We ourselves set to in earnest to economize troops on our own front as far as we could!

On the west bank, during all this period, things were, comparatively speaking, fairly quiet, so much so that on August 9th the High Command asked for the staff of the 24th R.C. to be held ready to move east. General Baron von Watter, commanding the 54th Division, was placed in charge of “Sector 304” with the 192nd, 54th and 38th Divisions under him. It was found impossible to withdraw these two latter formations into Army reserve in place of the 19th R.C., which had just returned from the Somme. General von Mudra, in the Argonne, who had recently sent his 33rd Division to the East bank, was now ordered to send his 34th Division Army reserve, receiving in its place the reorganized Alpine Corps. On the East bank we needed divisions which, not having yet been through the hell there, still had their nerves unimpaired and could form an effective mobile reserve in the event of a hostile attack expected shortly to take place against our positions on the line of heights between Thiaumont and Fleury.

On August 12th I once more reviewed Captain Rohr’s storm battalion at Beuveille, congratulating them on their splendid attack against some of the most strongly fortified

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and well-provided of the hostile trenches during the recent operations, and their skilful use of all the most up-to-date bombs and technical appliances, and expressing to them the pleasure it would give me to bring its achievements before the notice of His Majesty. Everyone was agreed as to the splendid work of these storm troops and the value of training them intensively according to Rohr's methods ; but it seemed likely that frequent reliefs, owing to the rapid exhaustion of the troops, might not allow time for such training. We were still far behindhand in the thorough training of the troops in mutual co-operation for the single purpose in view. The troops engaged at Verdun, at all events, were fully trained in the attack under the completely novel conditions now obtaining. It was to my mind one of the greatest services rendered by General Ludendorff that, on his assumption of the Higher Command, he lost no time in initiating a very necessary and desirable change of policy in this respect.

### DISCUSSIONS AS TO THE CONTINUATION OR CESSATION OF THE OFFENSIVE IN THE MIDDLE OF AUGUST

On August 12th my Chief of Staff was ordered to attend a conference with Main Headquarters at Mézières, where considerable doubt was arising as to the advisability and possibility of continuing the Verdun operations in their original form. For the first time the discussions between Falkenhayn and Knobelsdorf do not appear to have resulted in an agreement—if one may judge from the contents of a letter sent out by the former on August 15th :

“The great importance, in our present situation, of convincing both the enemy and our own troops that the offensive on the Meuse has not entirely come to an end must be clear to all. Moreover, the present position of our first lines on the right bank of the Meuse is such as to necessitate that all means should be employed to improve it before the coming of the autumn rains. On the other hand, the present military situation, strained as it is, compels us to economize men and munitions wherever possible. From this point of view it seems a matter for serious consideration whether the offensive should not be broken off. We must not, however, lose sight of the fact that as soon as the enemy realizes our real inten-

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tions he will not lose a day in taking effective counter-measures, making full use of his numerical superiority, either at Verdun or elsewhere, and may cause us more serious damage than the losses we have hitherto suffered in the course of our operations on the Meuse. I beg that the commanders of both attacking Groups will give their views as soon as possible, and place them with their proposals before the High Command."

My personal appreciation of the situation, which had for some time been no longer identical with that of my Chief of Staff, was summed up as follows, in my letter: "No economy of men or munitions can possibly result from the continuation of the attack against the strong enemy lines before Verdun. Our earlier attacks on a broad front, assisted by a powerful artillery, plentifully supplied with munitions, were most successful; but used up a large number of divisions in a short time. As we are now situated, the supply of reserves and munitions being short, I greatly fear that yet more forces—and these the last!—of the Group of Armies may be involved in an attack on a narrow front, exposed to the concentric fire of the enemy. Under such conditions we could, at the best, hope for no real gain, and any success at all would be most doubtful."

General von François, the Commander of the Western Group, considered that it was essential to continue the offensive, though on a scale compatible with the available supply of men and munitions, in order to retain strong French forces in our front. To abandon it entirely would be a confession of weakness which could not fail to put new heart into the enemy, and would probably enable him to increase his forces available for offensive purposes.

While the Western Group thus recommended the continuation of the offensive with limited objectives, largely for reasons of morale, General Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, my Chief of Staff, in his written project for the resumption of the attack on the east bank, in the area east of Froideterre, based himself rather on tactical considerations. He stated that once winter had come, the supply of the necessities of life to the troops, even now a matter of considerable difficulty and loss, would become impossible, as our front lines and communications lay everywhere open to enemy observation. In his view the only way out of this dilemma was to advance our front by the capture of the line of heights Fleury village-Fort Souville-Berg wood; this

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could be held in comfort, as the enemy would no longer be able to command the valleys to the north-east of this line, and the sending up of reserves and supplies to the front and the movements of our artillery would be greatly facilitated. Situated as we were, we could not hope to reduce our casualties, and even if the attack cost us heavily at the time we should reap the benefit later.

Finally, the Commander of the East Group, General von Lochow, who had led our first victorious attacks at the head of his 3rd R.C., knew more of the theatre of operations and the situation from every point of view than any other man, came to the same conclusion as his predecessor, General von Mudra. He saw no purpose in the continuation of the previous offensive. The enemy could not be deprived of his facilities for observation from the forts, and the capture of Fort Souville would only result in the same endless fighting and heavy losses as that of Fort Vaux. He, as General von Mudra had done, preferred a gradual advance, section by section, and the improvement of our positions not by an advance over the open heights but by an attempt to work round and outflank them by way of the La Lauffée redoubt and Dicourt farm.

Had the "serious consideration of the question of discontinuing the offensive" resulted in common conclusion agreed to both by myself and my Chief of Staff; had we decided that after full consideration of the arguments in favour of the adherence to the previous policy, we believed that the attack should be broken off and that, if necessary, our line might even be withdrawn to positions more suited for defence, the High Command would have known where they stood. As, however, my Chief of Staff did not share my views as to the uselessness of further attacks, and as his well-known strength of will and military ability made him *persona grata* with Falkenhayn, the latter, in answer to our joint letters of August 18th, wrote to my Group of Armies, on August 21st, as follows :

"The general situation renders it urgently necessary to keep the enemy in the Meuse area under the impression that the offensive on the German side has not been abandoned but will be systematically continued. It is left to the Army Group Command to decide how this can best be accomplished with the necessarily limited means at its disposal. It should be remembered that by the commencement of winter the Army



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Group should be in a position to be able to maintain itself indefinitely on the line then occupied."

This could in no sense be regarded as an order or a decision of Main Headquarters. Only one thing was clear from the letter, that my Army Command would have to shoulder the responsibility for the choice of its future attitude. We were to give the enemy the impression that we meant to pursue the attack with the limited means at our disposal, and also choose a favourable defensive position suited for occupation during the winter. Whether the policy favoured by my Chief of Staff or that preferred by me was most likely to achieve this purpose was left unsettled. Despite the cryptic nature of this document, however, I was secretly glad to be freed from a weight of responsibility which had become intolerable, and once more to be my own master. I knew well enough the course I was bound to choose.

During the whole period from August 15th, when we were first asked for our views, until the arrival of the above reply on the 21st, the enemy had proved to us every day that he was as strong as ever, and was determined to persist in his attack, and that the initiative had now once for all passed to him. Violent artillery activity against the 18th R.C. sector, on August 16th, appeared to be the prelude to a hostile offensive. The Guard Ersatz Division, which was considered too weak to hold the line under these conditions, was to be relieved by the 14th Bavarian Division. Against the West Group also, the whole of the enemy's guns opened extraordinarily heavy bursts of fire at frequent intervals, and these were followed by rifle fire, bombing, and trench mortar activity. About 7 p.m. the bombardment in the 18th R.C. sector, near the Souville salient, swelled to drumfire, but a captured officer stated that the intended attack had been nipped in the bud by our barrage.

On the morrow heavy fire continued all day against all our sectors east of the Meuse, as far as that of the 7th R.C., and became especially violent in that of the 18th R.C. about midday. In the evening the French delivered three attacks in strength against Höhn's Group and the 18th R.C. in the Fleury position and drove us from part of the ruins of the village. The 21st Reserve Division dealt successfully with all attacks on its front. Fighting continued far into the night, and again broke out everywhere at 3 a.m. on August 18th.

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While all this was going on, Main Headquarters ordered us to detach yet more forces to the south-eastern front.

The French continued their attacks very vigorously throughout the whole of this day, throwing strong forces repeatedly against Thiaumont redoubt, and our lines north of it, Fleury village and the area south of Fort Vaux. Counter-attacks were at once ordered whenever they forced their way into small sections of our defences, and in many places fierce hand to hand fighting occurred. Wherever the enemy attacked in mass, he lost extremely heavily, especially at such points as his retiring troops were caught by the frontal or enfilade fire of our heavy field howitzers. We were compelled, however, to bring forward troops from Army reserve and keep them ready to be thrown into the line at any moment.

The counter-offensive, which had been ordered for August 19th, could not, on account of the effective fire of the French artillery, be carried out either by Höhn's Group or by the 15th A.C. On the contrary, the French renewed their efforts and wrested from us the greater part of Fleury village. On the 20th, the 126th Württemberg Regiment of the 50th Division succeeded in part in restoring their front, which had been broken on the 18th. The relief of the Guard Ersatz Division by the 14th Bavarian Division took place as arranged, but now we had also to order the relief of the 14th Division by the 84th Division.

### THE CHANGE IN THE POST OF CHIEF OF THE ARMY STAFF

How were we, situated as we were, to set about maintaining in the enemy the belief that we still adhered to our offensive plans? How were we, in addition to this, to secure a more forward position which we could be sure of holding during the bad season? On these points there arose a divergence of opinion between myself and my Chief of Staff, which finally became so acute as to be quite intolerable. I, therefore, at length made up my mind, that as our differences might compromise the safety of the army, to come to such an open breach with my Chief of Staff as to compel my father to transfer him to another sphere of activity. The opportunity was given me by his action, on August 21st, at the headquarters of the 10th R.C. The former commander of this corps, General von

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Luttwitz, was appointed to succeed him in the post of Chief of Staff of the Army.

The solution of the conflict which I thus adopted was no easy one for me. As I have often stated, the power of decision and iron resolution of my distinguished Chief of the Staff had always aroused my admiration, and I owed him a deep debt of gratitude for his two years' unceasing labour at the difficult tasks which one in his post was called on to fulfil. But in the matter of Verdun there had come over him a change which I could not follow. We were both agreed at first that it was a question for us of a rapid surprise blow to be pushed home with reckless energy by strong reserves always kept in full readiness until the works on the east bank, and with them the fortress, should be forced to capitulate. Once our original project of a simultaneous offensive on both banks had been abandoned in favour of an attack on the east bank only, we had always adhered to this latter scheme. The road to Verdun, as I have shown above, and as we knew at the time from captured officers' statements, confirmed since the war from French sources, was in reality clear for a short time after our first overwhelming surprise attack; and if the reserves expressly promised by the High Command had been on the spot, we must have been completely successful. This opportunity once lost, the preliminary conditions essential to the success of our gigantic enterprise, of surprising and carrying the strongest point of the whole enemy line in the West, ceased to exist. At the same time the fact that our difficulties were now greater did not justify the abandonment of our offensive altogether—at any rate, for the moment.

Following on our first successful combats, however, our progress began to slow down, and such gains as we made were indecisive. Main Headquarters was, therefore, faced with the question whether it would still try to force a decision or should break off the attack for a time. At the beginning of April I should have preferred the latter alternative, and for the moment it seemed that General von Falkenhayn thought as I did. My own Chief of Staff, on the contrary, had completely changed his views, and adopted the standpoint that the enemy should be "bled white." Thus he had come round to the original idea of Falkenhayn's at the very moment when the latter appeared to have abandoned it. I purposely say

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'appeared,' for before long I had to face the fact that both Falkenhayn and Knobelsdorf had come back to the advisability of pursuing the former's first plan, and were unanimous that the offensive in the Meuse area against Verdun should go on, notwithstanding my repeated protests and despite our failure to achieve any important success. General von Knobelsdorf, even after that May 14th, which must have shaken his faith, always took his stand against me on the orders of Main Headquarters. I have never been able to decide whether the outward agreement between these two strong-willed personalities was the result of fierce disputes in the council chamber; if so, it is not easy, even for the psychologist, to discover the moment when agreement was reached between these equally strong characters, so passionately determined to make their own will prevail. I cannot but feel a deep respect for the resolution and firmness they displayed in coming to their decision, even though—as in this case—I regarded the course proposed and the means adopted as useless and ill considered.

I have more than once emphasized the difficulties of the situation in which I now found myself. For months I had to struggle ceaselessly to subdue my own convictions to the dictates of my duty as a soldier. Such heart-burnings are the common lot of every commander in war; but for me they were like an overflowing cup of gall which I might not empty at one draught, but must slowly drain to the last dregs of bitterness. My sense of duty as a soldier prevailed until, in the middle of August, Falkenhayn's change of attitude, hesitating, as it was, towards the Verdun problem, afforded me my opportunity. Without doing violence to my soldierly feelings I was now able to not only express—that I had often done before—but to secure the acceptance of my firm conviction as to the uselessness and absurdity of longer adherence to our previous ideas.

At the latter end of August the French continued to push their violent attacks on the Thiaumont-Fleury front, but without gaining more than local successes. We were gradually, however, forced step by step out of the whole of Fleury village. The ever-present need for fresh divisions caused General von Gayl's 10th Ersatz Division to be brought into line on the southern front of Strantz's Army Detachment in place of the Guard Ersatz Division, to which I bade farewell on August



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25th at Mouzon. The Eastern Group was during the next few days allotted the 192nd Saxon Division from the west bank and the 7th Reserve and 33rd Reserve Divisions, for purposes of relief. These rapid changes involved considerable confusion and a great increase of work in accommodating and moving the staffs and troops. Moreover, at this time my new Chief of Staff, General von Luttwitz, was engaged on the difficult business of taking over his duties, on August 27th, and my former First General Staff Officer, Count Schulenburg, who had been appointed Chief of Staff of the Sixth Army, was relieved by Major Matthias.

My relations with my new Chief of Staff, who was only with me for some three months, were from the first excellent. He entered into my ideas rapidly and without reservations, especially as regards the question of the cessation of the offensive. General von Luttwitz was a most exceptional character, a man of great personal courage, who never spared himself, and treated his subordinates strictly but justly. In peace time he had qualified on the administrative side of the Staff College, but he was pre-eminently a leader of men rather than a staff officer—in a word, more a Blücher than a Gneisenau.

### THE CHANGE IN THE HIGH COMMAND; CESSATION OF THE OFFENSIVE AGAINST VERDUN

The military situation of the Central Powers was now taking a serious turn. On August 28th Italy declared war on Germany, and Rumania on Austria; and a few days later we ourselves declared war on Rumania. Thus we were faced with the probability of fresh great efforts to support our Allies and maintain the *status quo* in the Balkans. Rumania's action at this juncture was no doubt directly inspired by the collapse of the Austrian Army in face of the Russian attack.

This state of things gave the final impulse to the decision to appoint Field Marshal Hindenburg Chief of the General Staff of the Field Armies, and General Ludendorff First Quarter-Master General. The new redistribution of the Western Armies into two groups was also taken in hand at this time. The right wing, under the Crown Prince of Bavaria, comprised the Sixth, First, Second and Seventh Armies, and I myself, while retaining command of the Fifth Army, was also given control

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of the Third Army, and thus of the whole front from Champagne to the Swiss frontier. The Fourth Army, on the extreme right, remained under the independent command of Duke Albrecht of Württemberg.

From many points of view the retiring Chief of the General Staff, General von Falkenhayn, possessed my highest esteem and regard. He had conducted operations, in face of the greatest difficulties, with great resolution and decision, and had taken upon his own person the heavy responsibilities of both Minister of War and Chief of the Staff. While he was at the helm my Army was always justified in its faith that its demands on the High Command for material and supplies of every kind would, as far as possible, be met. I have endeavoured to explain how and why I was unable, in the conduct of the Verdun operations, to follow faithfully the course of action conceived by Falkenhayn. The ideas which were ever present to his mind seemed to me to be in disaccord with wise moderation, with the essential economy of men and means which he himself had originally laid down as the only possible strategic resource for Germany. For this reason I hoped to see a radical change in the conduct of operations as a result of the change of personnel at Imperial Headquarters, and welcomed the advent of Field Marshal von Hindenburg and General Ludendorff, who were generally acclaimed as national heroes.

The previous course of events in the East where these two men had been in command seemed to justify my confidence that now that they had been entrusted with the control of our operations in all theatres, they would seek for strategic decisions only at the place where the best results were to be achieved, and would practise strict economy of force in sectors such as Verdun, where we could hope for no lasting success. Up to a certain point these hopes were fulfilled, for Main Headquarters, in reply to my note of August 31st, which went fully into the whole question, informed me on September 2nd that the offensive against Verdun should be broken off and the line then held consolidated.

The net result, then, of more than six months of continuous attacks was in the main a failure, but a failure relieved by countless deeds of heroism and great achievements. The blood of brave men had flowed in rivers. Was it in vain? At

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the time, in the midst of the fearful drama of the war, it seemed so to me, despite our great totals of captures—1,400 officers, 64,000 men, 250 guns, 600 machine-guns. To-day we can look back, and by the light of history, as written by our enemies, and of the secret debates in the French Chamber, we can see more clearly. And it was beyond doubt that our stubborn and unceasing pressure against Verdun exercised a deep-seated influence on the actions and decisions of the enemy High Command, on the morale of the French people, and on the whole course of the war. The colossal expenditure of force and the extremely severe losses of the French, amounting in the sum total to more than double our own, were evidence of a moral and material weakening which incapacitated them from playing anything like the rôle in the Somme battle allotted to them in the Allied scheme of operations, and essential if the decisive success of the offensive were to be ensured. These established facts must be taken into consideration in any attempt to sit in judgment on the German offensive for Verdun.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE CONCLUSION OF THE FIGHTING AROUND VERDUN IN 1916

#### THE VIEWS OF THE NEW HIGH COMMAND AS TO THE SITUATION ON THE WESTERN FRONT

THE assumption of supreme command by Hindenburg and Ludendorff brought with it heavy responsibilities. On all fronts we were on the defensive and must expect to see the force of the hostile attacks increasing with the enemy's numbers and the decline of our own strength. The High Command at once entered upon a fresh reorganization of our means of defence. The new divisions, for instance, were to consist of only three regiments, in order to make them more flexible; and for this purpose many of the existing divisions gave up one of their regiments to form a new division. Of my own Fifth Army, the 4th, 19th Reserve and 10th Ersatz Divisions were the first affected. We were also compelled by the critical state of affairs on the Somme, and the necessity of an immediate decisive blow against Rumania, to dispatch important forces to these areas. First, the headquarters of the 10th Reserve Corps was sent off to the south-east, and the 16th Corps, now the "Mudra Group," took over the command of all the troops on the Argonne front (21st Reserve, 9th Landwehr, 19th Reserve and 16th Bavarian Divisions and the Alpine Corps). Its sector extended from the left of the Third Army to Franke's Group (2nd Landwehr and 4th Divisions).

On September 3rd the Eastern Group gained a splendid success in the occupation of the Souville ravine, thanks mainly to the dash of General von Rauchenberger's 14th Bavarian Division. As this carefully-prepared enterprise resulted only in a local improvement in our front line positions, it could



## Conclusion of the Fighting around Verdun in 1916

be regarded as coming within the limits of the defensive imposed on us. Enemy counter-strokes were beaten off and we held our gains.

On September 7th I met, on Montmédy Station, the new Chief of the Staff, Field Marshal von Hindenburg, and General Ludendorff on their first visit to the Western front—the crack company of Rohr's storm battalion forming a guard of honour. A discussion of the situation on my Army front took place between us on the journey to Charleville, and on September 8th the Group Commanders, the Commanders of the Fourth, First and Second Armies, and all the Army Chiefs of Staff were summoned to a conference at the Crown Prince of Bavaria's Headquarters at Cambrai. The Field Marshal informed us that we were, of course, bound to hold our ground both in the East and in the West. The fighting on the Somme continued to absorb fresh forces, which would be drawn from both the Crown Princes' Groups, equipped and after use refitted and rested in quiet sectors. Landwehr and Landsturm formations were also to be utilized in such sectors, so as to liberate as many first-line divisions as possible for the Somme. The amount of such assistance to be given was only to be limited by the necessity of holding our present front everywhere, especially at Verdun, where the French, despite the fighting on the Somme, still had strong forces concentrated.

We were also informed from the same authoritative source that the Eastern front, as far as could humanly be foreseen, was firmly established from Kovel to Riga, but on the Carpathian front and in Volhynia and Galicia the further support of German troops would be necessary. In view of the poor quality of the Austrian troops, their intermixture with German forces, even down to the smallest units, was of the utmost value; nevertheless, our strategic prospects were limited by the possibility of a repulse in this area. The situation on the Italian, Caucasian and Macedonian fronts was likely, as the Field Marshal considered, to remain unchanged at the moment. He pointed out that despite the strain on our resources both in the East and in the West, we must still aim at definite results during the present year, and, as things stood at present, these could only be secured against Rumania, whose army appeared at first sight to be of inferior quality. For this purpose and in addition to those forces required for the above tasks, yet

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further dispatches of troops would be necessary, and these would be reinforced by new formations.

"We must hope," the Field Marshal concluded, "to hold our ground till the end of 1916 and finish up with a decisive victory."

The subsequent regulation of the necessary details involved, as far as my Army was concerned, serious demands on the energies of the front-line troops and the organizing ability of the staffs; but we all came away from this memorable conference with the feeling that the Army and the country could look with confidence to the new High Command.

### THE CHANGED CONDITIONS ON THE FRONT OF THE GROUP OF ARMIES FROM THE BEGINNING OF SEPTEMBER ONWARDS

On my Army front the consolidation of our lines, unfavourably placed as they frequently were for continuous occupation, was absolutely essential if we were to be in a position to detach forces for other purposes. In view of these demands on us for men and material, all idea of any attacks had to be abandoned, apart from such as were absolutely necessary for the recovery of lost ground. This involved a thorough reorganization of the whole system of barrage and S.O.S. calls, on the accuracy of which we relied for dealing with hostile attacks. Despite our best efforts, we never succeeded in devising a satisfactory system of this kind in the Verdun area simply because—as I must, in justice to my troops, emphatically point out—the French in this battle zone had secured and made skilful use of a quiet advantage over us owing to our unfavourable tactical situation.

The enemy, on September 6th, broke through our lines on a front of some 200 yards south-east of Thiaumont redoubt, and recaptured the greater part of the hotly-contested Souville ravine and salient. Reinforcements to replace our losses, which were still heavy, arrived only at long intervals of time, and the formation of the smaller new divisions from the troops combed from the original formations, which was still in progress, if it made the units more numerous and easier to handle, resulted in a decrease in rifle strength and in the number of guns.

Within my command, the division of functions was so

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arranged that my Chief of Staff, acting as head of both, had under him four General Staff Officers, two for the Group of Armies, and two for the Fifth Army. We always made it our aim to leave the staffs of Armies and Army Detachments which were working under us as free a hand as possible, and had the utmost belief in their independence ; but, on the other hand, these staffs had the right to expect assistance from the Higher Command whenever they required it, and especially looked to it in all matters connected with the material well-being of the troops. I always look back with pleasant recollections to my daily personal discussions with a commanding general and his staff, with the representative of a superior or lower staff, or with the individual soldiers themselves in the fighting area, where I often found an opportunity of granting some cherished personal request and dispensing with the usual preliminary correspondence, for I knew well that many such papers forwarded through the usual channels were mislaid or considerably delayed in transit. I naturally felt it a sacred duty, strictly incumbent upon me, to perform this small personal duty when I visited the front lines in the main battle area, where the men's trials and sufferings, whether physical or mental, were so surpassingly great. The fighting soldier is always grateful even to excess for such small solace to his heart as can be afforded by his commander's sympathetic understanding of his needs ; he fully realizes that the conduct of war needs an iron resolution and sternness of soul, but it is a satisfaction to him to know that his leaders are asking him not to endure evils which can be avoided. I therefore strove with all my power to cheer the hearts of my soldiers ; but only they themselves can judge of the extent of my success.

Apart from the constant departure of whole divisions for the Somme, there went with them a vast number of special formations, such as artillery, engineers, aeroplane and airship squadrons, labour and technical battalions, which left us without any reserves of these units on the Verdun front. At the same time troops were constantly leaving us for the armies now forming in Rumania. General Köhne's 54th General Command, recently formed for special service, replaced the Alpine Corps, which had gone to Siebenburg, but no troops came with it ; indeed, we had at the time of its arrival just received orders to equip most of our divisions resting behind

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the lines and newly-formed divisions, such as the 213th, for open warfare in the Balkans. It became necessary, if the necessary reliefs of troops and commanders were to be carried out without delay and danger, to retain not only the higher commands, but also the corps, as far as possible, permanently in the sectors they now occupied, and to transform them into standing groups and administrative organizations; theirs was the heavy and responsible task of finding reserves for the battle-front from among the Landsturm and Landwehr formations sent forward by the Lines of Communication Inspections, the General Government of Belgium and the garrison staffs in Germany. This task had been laid upon us as a matter of honour, to report to the High Command wherever we could spare a fighting formation for the Somme or the Rumanian front; and we were thus compelled to cut down the garrison of Metz to its lowest limits and even to thin out the troops holding our front lines in many sectors, much as we regretted the necessity of doing so. The Hill 304 and Franke Groups on the west bank of the river were broken up, and their divisions placed under the direct command of the 7th Corps. Situated as we were, it was urgently necessary to push on with the construction of second-line positions. The sketches of the proposed rear lines of defences sent to the High Command on September 12th showed a continuous reserve system on the east bank from Champneuville by Douaumont and Ornes to Metz; for the construction of this we had no choice but to utilize the energies of the troops at rest, in the existing lack of labour battalions, most of which had been sent off elsewhere.

For the moment, then, our main concern was to hold our positions and make our wearied men as comfortable as possible when out of the line. On the Somme, following on the hostile attacks of September 3rd and 4th, a renewed offensive on an even larger scale opened on the 12th; south of the river we held our ground on the greater part of the front; north of it the enemy effected a deep penetration to the east and north-east, and only by desperate and unceasing efforts was the breach closed. Many divisions and special formations destined for Rumania had, despite the importance of that theatre, to be recalled and hurried to the Somme.

On September 10th my Army Headquarters issued the following instructions, based on the indications given us at



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the Cambrai conference by the Field-Marshal and General Ludendorff:

"In view of the demands on our army for the despatch of troops, material and munitions to other fronts, it is to be desired that the front of the Crown Prince's Group of Armies should remain quiet, and that at the main points where fighting has taken place there should be a gradual cessation of activity. No offensive movements are to take place, except where absolutely necessary, in order to recover any key-points of our defensive positions that may be lost. The utmost activity on the part of our patrols is, however, still essential for the identification of enemy units."

While the troops, in accordance with these instructions, were confined to the strict defensive, apart from a few small local enterprises carried out by shock troops, and were busying themselves in the construction of trenches and dugouts, the High Command was once more compelled, by the perilous situation on the Somme and the course of the Rumanian operations, to make yet further demands on my Group of Armies. The necessary forces for these purposes could no longer be drawn from the comparatively quiet areas in Champagne and Argonne or from the three Army Detachments. We were, therefore, driven to extend our sectors, and thin out our men to a far greater extent than was desirable, but we had only a choice of evils. The 5th Army front before Verdun was really rendered insecure, owing to its weakness in artillery and aircraft. The emphatic protests and remonstrances addressed by us, as in duty bound, to the High Command failed to move them; indeed, the critical strategic situation left them no other alternative. "The decision in the West"—so ran their reply of September 22nd—"will be brought about on the Somme in a measurable time from now, and we must, at all costs, hold our positions there. Under the present hostile pressure this is only possible by throwing every fighting division at our disposal gradually into the battle. This must be remembered when sending divisions into line on the east bank of the Meuse."

At the end of September the 5th Army was organized as follows:

Mudra's Group in and on either side of the Argonne numbered five divisions. Three of these were for a short time under the 18th Reserve Corps, which had handed over its former

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sector on the east bank between Douaumont and Vaux to the 12th (Saxon) Corps, under General von der Planitz about the middle of the month. All these were tired divisions, with the exception of the 9th Landwehr Division of General von Zippel, which had not left its sector.

The Western Meuse Group, under General von François, comprised four divisions, including the 2nd Landwehr Division on the right in Cheppy wood, where it had for many months remained in sector. The fighting value of the remaining three divisions was not high, as they had for the most part suffered severely in battle and been sent into line again with very little rest.

The Eastern Meuse Group of General von Lochow was sub-divided into four commands—the 7th Reserve Corps, 54th General Command, 12th and 15th Corps. The three first-named consisted of three, and the last of two divisions. Early in October General von Deimling and the two divisions (30th and 39th) of his corps (the 15th) left the 5th Army, and General von Steuben's 18th Reserve Corps, returning from the Argonne, took over the left sector of the Eastern Meuse Group in the Woivre. Halfway through October General von Kühne's 54th General Command and one of its divisions was taken out of line and not replaced; and General von der Planitz's sector was extended to cover the remaining two divisions of this Command.

The Army Reserve consisted of three divisions, one on the left and two on the right bank. This was the minimum number notified by us to the High Command as absolutely essential.

The enemy fortunately did not make use of his freedom of action to undertake any infantry advance on a serious scale, but seemed, like ourselves, to be devoting all his energies to trench digging. Such attacks as took place for instance about September 15th near the Thiaumont redoubt, and on the 18th and 19th on the western slopes of the Mort Homme, always took the form of local and partial operations, and, for the most part, were repulsed and led to small losses of ground of no importance. On the contrary, the normal artillery activity on the enemy's side more than once increased to great violence as favourable opportunity presented itself, while the numerical hostile superiority of the French airmen began to make itself felt to our disadvantage.

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### THE POSITION ON THE VERDUN FRONT IN THE SECOND HALF OF SEPTEMBER AND IN OCTOBER

Generally, it may be said that from the middle of September onwards, and especially during the first half of October, activity on both sides became noticeably less ; even in the area of the Eastern Meuse Group everything was more or less peaceful. If we reckon the daily expenditure of shells on the east bank in the middle of June, at the culminating point of our offensive, at 93,000, it had certainly fallen by the middle of October to less than a quarter of that total. The number of our heavy batteries had dropped from 140 to under 70. It was reckoned that the proportion of enemy shells fired to ours was as seven to one at this time, but even this was relatively far less than at the most intense period of the battle. Our heavy periodical roll of casualties also began to assume a more satisfactory length, being in the first ten days of October about one-seventh of what it had been in June. Yet the moral and physical strain on the troops was unusually great, largely by reason of the setting in of unbroken bad weather, lasting for some weeks, the lack of sufficient or, indeed, any shelter, especially in the front trenches, the endlessly long and perilous lines of approach to the forward defences, and great difficulties of supply. The number of sick increased alarmingly ; frequent reliefs of the front-line troops were found necessary, and little time could be found for rest and refitment.

Very slow progress was made with the construction of trenches and camps, especially on the heights east of the Meuse. The rocky ground, riddled and shattered by months of shelling, was covered with a thin but impenetrable layer of soil, which necessitated a considerable use of blasting powder ; and elsewhere we were forced to have recourse to sandbag parapets, which were easily destroyed by prolonged bombardment. As a general rule there could be built only a single continuous trench line without wire or obstacle in front or communication trenches in rear. Further back some deep dugouts were begun for sheltering the supports. The water question was the difficulty, as drainage facilities were non-existent. As against this, however, the work on the west bank and in the Woevre plain made better progress, thanks to the cessation of activity in these sectors.

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The question of supply was also a difficult one, largely owing to the condition of the ground and the roads. Full use was made of all possible means, such as military and field railways and tramways, pack animals and so forth, but none the less, whole regiments had often to be utilized as carrying parties, thus losing the rest so urgently needed.

Each man could carry but a small load, and even so only a certain proportion of the whole arrived at the destination, many being left lying in the water-logged shell-holes, where more than one poor fellow was drowned. The troops had to carry with them, into their positions, enough food and water to last them over their spell of duty; warm food could seldom be provided, as it was impossible to bring the field kitchens far enough forward. During the bad weather ammunition was brought up to the battery positions in limbers without bodies, and these often needed 10 or 12 horses to get them up. Even now I cannot recall without grief and deep emotion the fearful sufferings of my gallant fighters before Verdun; my pen is not eloquent enough to do justice to their stubborn endurance.

All these circumstances were reported to His Majesty in a memorandum from my 5th Army, despatched from Pierrepont on October 17th, and in this the question was raised whether it would not be wise in the interests of economy of strength, and with a view to relieving the strain on the troops, to withdraw our front on the heights to the east of the river to the Douaumont-Hardaumont ridge. General von Kühne had just before his departure asked for permission to adopt this course, but General von Lochow, mindful of his experiences during the months of heavy fighting from March to May, strictly forbade it for tactical reasons. Were this done, the artillery could not render effective support to the infantry, and in case of any serious fighting the necessity for keeping artillery observation posts in or close behind the front line would be a grave disadvantage. The Army Command concurred in these views.

The only possible way of bettering our tactical position at Verdun would have been a complete withdrawal of our defensive front on both banks of the river to the positions held by us before the opening of the battle. But this would have been an open admission that our great offensive had proved a complete failure, and would have had an immeasurably disastrous moral effect alike on the army, the homeland and on



## Conclusion of the Fighting around Verdun in 1916

enemy and neutral countries, more especially as our general situation was at the moment so critical. Moreover, it would have meant showing our cards to an unreasonably dangerous extent. The enemy already realized that he had not to fear any immediate resumption of our interrupted offensive, but he was bound to regard our present positions as a possible future cause of danger to him, though we were for the moment confining ourselves to a defensive attitude. Thus he could hardly feel himself at liberty to weaken his own front unduly ; he was bound to leave considerable forces in face of us in this area.

At the same time, we considered that if our hands were forced by the threat of a hostile counter-offensive on a large scale, and it became clear from the general situation, or from other indications, that such an offensive was to be expected, we should not hesitate to adopt the only effective *parade*, and retire to our former positions of February along the whole front. It did not appear, either to myself or to my Chief of Staff, that the time for this had yet come. The main forces of the French had obviously left Verdun for the Somme. We knew that they had withdrawn whole divisions from in front of us, and replaced, if at all, only with tired troops ; their guns were less numerous, their line everywhere more thinly held. So long as the fighting on the Somme continued, we did not anticipate having to deal with strong attacks on a broad front ; for local and partial efforts we were always prepared, particularly on the east bank ; but these could not, to our minds, justify the decision to surrender the whole of the captured territory, purchased with the life-blood of my soldiers.

My Chief of Staff expressed his views on this proposal in no undecided terms to His Majesty, protesting against any undue weakening of our front, and pointing out that the fighting value of our troops was being seriously weakened by the arrival of so many new formations, with the consequent dispersion of units and change of commanders, by the utilization of Landsturm and garrison battalions in the forward areas, and by the lack of experience and ignorance of the art of handling men among the company officers.

It was soon to be made manifest that the preliminary conditions on which we had based the proposals in our memorandum of October 17th were not likely to be fulfilled.

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Looking back on these matters now, I cannot consider myself to have been wrong in not insisting on and executing the adoption of the radical expedient of a general withdrawal to our old lines. It must be admitted that the situation at Verdun, though quiet for the moment, might alter at a moment's notice; the works carried out before and during the war gave the enemy every facility for quietly assembling at any time masses of troops in rear of his front system, and delivering an attack which might come to us as a complete surprise. It was not easy for us to divine the exact moment when the Somme offensive had come to an end, and it was time for us to withdraw at Verdun before a great attack could be prepared against us. For such a withdrawal careful and complete preparations would have been necessary, and these would have taken time. I must therefore leave it to others to say whether the serious defeat of October 24th might not have been avoided if, on the 17th, we had decided on retiring to our former positions. The right moment for this measure would probably have been the beginning of September, when our offensive before Verdun was finally broken off.

### THE FRENCH OFFENSIVE ON OCTOBER 24TH

On October 24th, the date of the French offensive, the Eastern Meuse Group was composed as follows:

7th Reserve Corps sector: 14th, 18th and 25th Reserve Divisions—in area Vacherauville–Poivre hill–Thiaumont redoubt.

12th Corps (Hardaumont) sector: 34th, 54th and 9th Divisions—in area Thiaumont redoubt–Thiaumont–Fleury–Chapitre wood–Fumin wood.

18th Corps (Vaux) sector: 50th and 192nd Divisions and 19th Ersatz Division—in area Berg wood–Lauffée copses–Woevre.

The relief of the 25th Reserve Division, which had been in line since July 7th, by the 10th Division, under General Schwarte, was due to take place within the next few days. Only a part of the 34th Division was in line, as it had been withdrawn by order of the High Command without being replaced.

On the east bank the 5th Army had two divisions in reserve:

The 10th in the Marville–Colmey area.

The 5th in the Xivry–Circourt area.

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The coming attack was announced some days beforehand by a bombardment of increasing violence and augmented aerial activity on the part of the enemy. According to the statements of prisoners taken on October 23rd, zero hour was to be at 2.30 p.m. on the morrow. On that same day our whole front from Vacherauville to Damloup was heavily shelled, as well as the country far into the back areas. Fort Douaumont was struck and its tunnels blown in in several places by shells of a heavier calibre than any we had yet



SKETCH 3.—The French Attacks at Verdun on October 24 and December 15, 1916.

encountered; the interior of the fort was set on fire, and had to be partly evacuated. Finally, on the morning of the 24th, the whole garrison was withdrawn, leaving only a few artillery observers under Captain Prollius.

At 7 a.m. on the 24th the hostile artillery fire increased notably in volume, and continued at this height all the morning. Thick mist prevented observation even at short ranges, and all our means of communication had broken down, except for a few carrier pigeons and runners, who managed to over-

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come the difficulties of the sodden ground and the fierce hostile barrage of the areas in rear of our front lines. No S.O.S. calls got through until far too late to be of any use. During the later stages of the battle the obscurity of the situation, and the fact that the infantry could see but a short distance to their front, prevented them from getting effectual support from their guns. We now had cause to regret bitterly the deficiencies of the new organization which we had initiated by centralizing the control in the hands of the corps and army artillery commanders. The only result of this was to facilitate the task of the enemy infantry, who, by following their own barrage closely, were able to surprise our garrisons while still crouching, physically and morally stupefied by the hostile bombardment, in their shattered trenches and shelters, and often before they had time even to make effective use of their weapons. Strong columns at the same time penetrated up all the ravines, surprising and overrunning our supports and reserves, or dispersing them after a short fight. By these means the resistance of the 25th Reserve, 54th and 9th Divisions was rapidly overcome, and the French infantry were only brought to a stand by our reserves on the steep slopes north of Douaumont village. The 33rd Reserve Division, whose right flank was menaced by this advance, was unable, despite the stubbornness of its resistance, to maintain its forward positions, and was withdrawn to the eastern slope of the Fumin ridge; it succeeded in retaining the Hardaumont ridge. The 50th Division also held its ground successfully on the hill of Vaux.

A counter-offensive ordered by the 12th Corps late that afternoon failed of its object; indeed, on a great part of the front it was never delivered, owing to the lack of unified direction or effective artillery support. Most of the units ordered to take part in it were utilized by the local commanders on the spot to fill up the gaps in our new line. On the morrow the gallant 50th Division victoriously repulsed a strong attack against Fort Vaux; but on the rest of the front the enemy, apart from a few small local advances, rested on his laurels, and confined himself to violent shelling of our new positions.

Apart from the loss of a considerable area of country—amounting in the centre of the battlefield to a depth of some two thousand yards of ground, which had only been conquered by us after weeks of incessant struggle—we suffered heavily



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in captures of prisoners and guns. The critical situation compelled us to throw into the breach at various points the reserve troops of the 5th and 10th Divisions as soon as they arrived, without any regular system for the reliefs. A shortage of munitions also made itself seriously felt. In view of these facts, the High Command, on the 25th, gave instructions, after discussing the situation with my Chief of Staff, that there should be no attempt at retaking the lost ground, and that the Group of Armies should confine itself to holding its actual positions. Within the next few days the 10th Division relieved the 25th Reserve, and the 5th Division the 9th in the front line.

Our new front ran in a flattened curve open to the south from Poivre hill by the slopes north of Douaumont to Hardaumont ridge. Further east it jutted out on the eastern slopes of Fumin ridge and Vaux hill in a salient, which had no immediate connection with the position on Hardaumont ridge. As the enemy's batteries persistently swept the Vaux valley by day and night, while his heavy guns directed their fire against Fort Vaux and the vicinity, the garrison of the work was entirely cut off from all communication with the outside world, and although it held out for some days with great resolution and repulsed several hostile attacks, its position quickly became untenable. The High Command, therefore, on October 31st, sanctioned the evacuation of the fort with the Fumin ridge and Vaux hill, and the withdrawal of our lines to the front Hardaumont-Dieppe-Nobras copse. This was carried out unnoticed and undisturbed by the enemy on the night of October 1st-2nd. Fort Vaux was not entered by the French till the next evening.

### THE POSITION BEFORE VERDUN FROM THE END OF OCTOBER TO THE BEGINNING OF DECEMBER

The French offensive of October 24th had only a limited objective, the capture of Forts Douaumont and Vaux. After this task had been completed by our evacuation of the latter work, there ensued another pause of several weeks, marked only by considerable artillery activity. Conditions remained as difficult as ever for the troops busied with the construction of defences, and in consequence of this their strength was taxed to excess. After carefully investigating the causes of

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the set-back on October 24th, we published the result and the lessons we had drawn from it to all troops for application as found necessary. It was difficult, however, owing to the frequent changes among the front-line troops, to secure the required modifications of our former methods. The views of the Army Command as to the most effective form of defence against the new French scheme of attack, initiated by General Nivelle on October 24th, could not be at once instilled into the troops, for as regards these matters we had not yet arrived at complete agreement among ourselves, and as regards certain points had not even formulated our views clearly. In fact, we were still feeling our way towards the system of mobile defence, which was a complete novelty to the troops.

Early in November General Chales de Beaulieu and the staff of the 14th Corps took over the Hardaumont sector from the 12th Corps. On November 25th there took place an important modification in my own position; I was now relieved of the direct command of my beloved Fifth Army, and placed at the head of a new Crown Prince's Group of Armies. At my request General von Lüttwitz, who had been given command of the 3rd Corps, was replaced in his position as Chief of my Staff by Col. Count Schulenburg. General von Lochow took over the Fifth Army with Lieut.-Colonel Baron von Ledebur as his Chief of Staff; the headquarters of the Eastern Meuse Group was broken up.

Meanwhile the Somme battle was dying away. Despite our considerable loss of territory during the months of bitter fighting, the general strategic result must be considered a defensive victory for Germany. Winter having set in with heavy rain, as always in France, further serious fighting appeared improbable. In order to be fully prepared for all eventualities before Verdun we set to work on the construction of a second defensive position in rear of the first, known as the "Fosses Wood line;" until this should be completed, we were bound to hold fast to our front lines in the event of a hostile offensive.

Contrary to our anticipations, however, the enemy in December once more delivered a powerful attack of short duration at Verdun.

On December 15th, when this offensive took place, the Fifth Army on the east bank of the Meuse stood as below:

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7th Reserve Corps sector: 14th, 39th and 10th Reserve Divisions—in the area Talou ridge–Poivre hill–Chauffour wood.

14th Corps (Hardaumont) sector: 14th Division and 39th Bavarian Reserve Division—in area north of Fort Douaumont–Hardaumont redoubt.

18th Corps (Vaux) sector: 4th and 192nd Divisions, 19th Ersatz Division—in the Woëvre.

Of these the 39th Division had only just come back from the Somme, and had been in line for about a week, and the 39th Bavarian Reserve Division for even less time than that. To entrust the last-named formation, which consisted mainly of reservists of thirty-five and forty years of age, and was in no sense a fighting division, with the defence of so important a point as the Hardaumont redoubt, was a serious mistake on the part of the Higher Command, for which I was myself in part responsible.

In reserve there stood four divisions:

The 13th Reserve Division, which was enjoying a short rest after nine months in the line at Verdun.

The 5th Division, which had been engaged three times in the Verdun battles, had just been relieved, and the main body of which was still *en route* for its rest billets.

The 21st Reserve Division, which had been out of line since the beginning of the month.

The Guard Ersatz Division, of which all but one regiment was still *en route*.

The French had had four of their reserve divisions, which had had a long period of rest, specially trained in the new Nivelle system of attack, and brought them up into line only two nights prior to the opening of the offensive.

Activity on the front during the first weeks of December had been in every way normal. The enemy was digging steadily. On the 8th a deserter reported that a large scale attack was impending. Thus the troops had more notice of the offensive than they had had prior to that of October 24th, and ample time to prepare for it. From December 9th onwards the artillery in the 7th Reserve and 14th Corps sectors carried out methodical shoots against the hostile trenches and redoubts, but owing to observation difficulties the results came short of expectations. The hostile shelling also increased

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in intensity from day to day. On the afternoon of December 14th an infantry attack on Poivre hill was repulsed.

### THE FRENCH ATTACK ON DECEMBER 15TH

At dawn on December 15th our artillery positions and all the ravines north of the line Louvemont–Hill 378–Bezonsvaux redoubt were heavily bombarded with gas shells. The French infantry advanced shortly before 11 a.m., after a two-hours' drumfire on the whole front from Vacherauville to Vaux. On our side the co-operation between infantry and artillery again left much to be desired, and our barrage came down too late.

In the centre of our front in Chauffour wood and north of Douaumont part of the 10th Division and General von Versen's 14th held their positions with great stubbornness till late in the evening. In the sectors to the right and left of them, however, the enemy broke through on a wide front. On our right wing Vacherauville, part of Poivre hill, Louvemont and Hill 378, and on our left the whole Hardaumont and Bezonsvaux redoubt ridge were lost. During the latter part of the day the enemy extended his large initial gains, and enveloped the positions still held by our troops in the centre from either flank and in rear. Fighting went on till late in the evening, but all our struggles were in vain. The heroic steadfastness of Colonel von Raysenberg, with the remnants of his Posen Grenadiers in Chauffour wood, the stubborn defence of the 16th Rhineland Regiment north of Douaumont, and of the 3rd Battalion of the 159th Westphalian Regiment on Poivre hill cast some lustre over the events of this black day. Our reserves intervening succeeded in checking the French advance on our right, north of Poivre hill and Louvemont, but on the opposite flank Bezonsvaux village was lost, and the enemy made considerable progress in the direction of Ornes. In the centre, thanks largely to the bold handling of five batteries of the 43rd Field Artillery Regiment, which came into action in the open unescorted at such close range that hand to hand fighting took place with the enemy's infantry, the latter were checked in front of Fosses and Chaume woods. The arrival of the battalions of the 21st Reserve and 5th Divisions in line here and on the left wing gave the defence the necessary stiffening. The units of the 14th Division on



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December 16th were withdrawn in succession and in good order from their forward positions in the Fosses wood line, thanks mainly to the heroic defence put up by the 56th and 57th Regiments under Capt. Proesch, and that same afternoon a strong attack against Fosses and Chaume woods and our defences south of Ornes was beaten off. At nightfall the bombardment gradually died out all along the front, and no further infantry attacks took place.

This second defeat before Verdun was marked by a disproportionately high total of prisoners lost, exceeding even those taken on October 24th. The enemy's communiqué claimed 11,000 prisoners, mostly unwounded, from all five of our divisions engaged.

Beyond a doubt mistakes were made by us in every branch of the command. My Group Headquarters, which had certainly been relieved of all direct responsibility by the constitution of the new Fifth Army Headquarters, was to blame for permitting our second-rate division to be kept in front line and for failure to allot aircraft to the army in sufficient strength and in good time. Our artillery defence was organized with insufficient flexibility and was too centralized, despite our unfortunate experience of October 24th. In one sector injudicious and indefinite orders on the part of the superior command had deprived the divisions of the right to dispose directly of their own batteries. Reserves were everywhere kept too far back, and were brought forward too late. Many of the higher staffs were also quartered too far from the battle zone to be able to issue clear and definite orders. But it would be incorrect to attribute our two serious defeats solely to these or any other particular circumstances. The spirit of the troops had declined to a marked degree, as was attested beyond all possibility of doubt by written and verbal reports and by the results of other inquiries. To a considerable extent their moral and power of resistance was unequal to the demands placed on them by their onerous task. It was essential to deduce from these phenomena the necessary conclusions, and to face them resolutely if we were to be victorious in the defensive campaign which certainly lay before us in the near future. The following extract from a written report sent from my Headquarters to the High Command is of interest in this connection :

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"The moral and power of resistance of the present-day soldier must be estimated at its true value and without self-deception. Only so can we judge the amount of training and discipline necessary to bring our units back to their former high military standard, and only so can the command form a true idea of what may be expected from the troops. . . .

"The numerous successful breaks-through which have recently occurred prove that the policy of a fixed defence in a single connected trench line as the main battle position, and the immediate counter-stroke delivered by troops held in readiness in or close behind such positions has proved defective. Once the assault has broken into the main position, the defence is usually reduced to hasty and uncertain measures of improvisation. The troops must once more be taught that it is the spirit and skill of the defenders that are the vital factors, rather than the positions occupied by them. The present exaggerated care devoted to the construction of positions which monopolizes our time and thought to the exclusion of more vital matters must give way before the spirit of the new defensive battle. Good troops should be able to hold even bad positions, where bad troops will be unable to maintain themselves even in the strongest defensive lines."

The mighty drive of the battles for Verdun in 1916 was now at an end! To the bold confident onslaught of the first February days had succeeded weeks and months of fierce, costly and slow advance; then the gradual diminution of our forces had led to the cessation of the offensive, and finally two regrettable set-backs had wrested back from us much of the blood-soaked ground we had so dearly won. Small wonder if this ill-starred end to our efforts wrung the hearts of the responsible commanders. Only a few days before the last French offensive I had received a careful and accurate verbal report of the defensive measure taken by the 5th Army from the lips of its prudent and competent Chief of the Staff, Lieut.-Colonel von Ledebur, and there was left on my mind the impression that both commanders and troops were facing the future with quiet confidence in their own powers. The ensuing disaster was, therefore, all the more bitter and unexpected. I knew now for the first time what it was to lose a battle. Doubt as to my own competence, self-commiseration, bitter feelings, unjust censures passed in quick succession through

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my mind and lay like a heavy burden on my soul, and I am not ashamed to confess that it was some time before I recovered my mental balance and my firm confidence in ultimate victory.

The serious repulse we had suffered on the east bank was to some extent counter-balanced by our successes on the opposite side of the river. Several carefully prepared local attacks on a small scale met with welcome success. On December 6th General von Borne's 13th Division captured an enemy salient on Hill 304; on December 28th General Dallmer's 10th Reserve Division stormed the French positions on the south slopes of the Mort Homme on a breadth of about 1,000 metres, and on January 25th, 1917, the 13th Division once more improved its positions on Hill 304 by a successful advance on a front of some 1,600 metres, maintaining their gains despite fierce enemy counter-attacks lasting for three days.

## CHAPTER X

### THE YEAR 1917

#### REORGANIZATION OF THE HEADQUARTERS STAFF OF THE ARMY GROUP OF THE GERMAN CROWN PRINCE

THE following descriptions differ from the detailed type given hitherto, inasmuch as, following on my changed duties, they do not deal with the details of battle tactics by the armies and army detachments under my command, but only with the main thread of operations.

The development of the situation in 1916 had retransferred the centre of gravity of the war to the West. This necessitated a fresh reorganization of the command on the Western front. Three army groups had gradually been established, each furnished with a special headquarters staff. In this way were formed Crown Prince Rupprecht's Army Group and the army group which remained under my command until the end of the campaign—in addition to which my command shortly afterwards included the 5th Army—and finally Duke Albrecht's Army Group. The headquarters staffs of the army groups henceforward drew up operative and tactical orders under Main Headquarters. The arrangement and control of the battle areas remained the duty of the armies represented by the quartermaster-generals and the Lines of Communications Inspectorate.

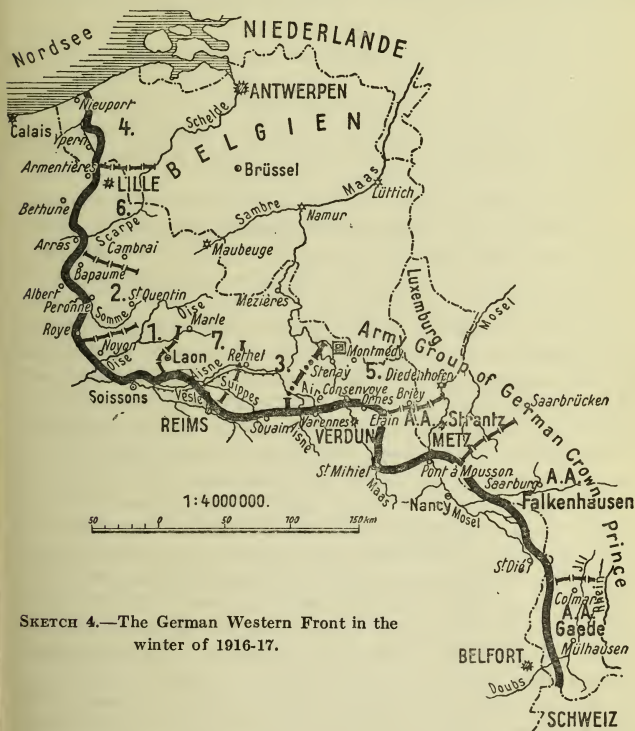
By order of Main Headquarters of 25th November, 1916, as has already been mentioned, the combined headquarters staff of the German Imperial Crown Prince's Army Group and the 5th Army was given up, and the latter army placed under a special headquarters staff, with headquarters at Montmédy. The sphere of command of what was henceforward the "Army Group of the German Crown Prince" included, after the 3rd Army had been placed under my command on 29th August,



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1916, the Western Front from Rheims to the Swiss frontier with a front length of about four hundred kilometres.

The seat of the headquarters staff remained at first at Stenay. At the time of the reorganization the commanders-in-chief were : Of the 3rd Army, Colonel-General von Einem ;



SKETCH 4.—The German Western Front in the winter of 1916-17.

of the 5th Army, Infantry General von Lochow, who was replaced at the end of December, 1916, by Artillery General von Gallwitz ; of Army Detachment C, Infantry General von Strantz, who was succeeded in January, 1917, by Infantry General von Boehn, and, when the latter in March became

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Commander-in-Chief of the 7th Army, Lieutenant-General Fuch; of Army Detachment "A," Infantry General d'Elsa, whose place was soon taken by Infantry General von Mudra; of Army Detachment "B," Infantry General von Gündell. In addition there belonged to my army group the fortresses of Diedenhofen, Metz and Strassburg, which were placed under Army Detachments "C," "A" and "B."

In contrast with the Army Headquarters Staff, the Army Group Headquarters Staff was small. Its personnel was always strictly limited, and special stress laid on keeping its members as far as possible permanent. To this principle is due the smooth co-operation and untroubled mutual confidence among all the members of my Headquarters Staff.

At the end of November, 1916, Colonel Count von der Schulenburg, hitherto Chief of Staff of the 6th Army, had at my request been appointed Chief of the General Staff of the Army Group. As I have mentioned, he had already stood at my side as General Staff Officer during the second part of the Verdun offensive. In addition to the Chief of Staff, four other General Staff Officers were attached to the Headquarters Staff, as well as two adjutants, two ordnance officers, and a number of officers of special branches. Later, the number of officers on the Headquarters Staff was from time to time increased in proportion to the multiplication of the tasks in hand.

A new division of duties regulated the sphere of activity and position of each member. This reorganization was maintained almost unchanged until the end of the campaign. It was regarded as particularly important that the officers of the Headquarters Staff, especially the General Staff officers, should keep in close touch with the front and with all subordinate commanding officers and units by personal inspection and visits. Accordingly the areas of the Army Group, particularly the firing line, was divided among these officers. I personally, as Commander-in-Chief of the Army Group, regarded it as my most important duty to visit as often as possible headquarters staffs, regiments and fighting areas. The great distances due to the length of the Army Group's front and the difficulty of leaving the seat of the Headquarters Staff during the period of almost uninterrupted severe fighting, which was now setting in to last until the Armistice, did not unfortunately allow me to carry out this duty of a commander-in-

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chief to the extent I should have wished, and which had been possible when I was Commander-in-Chief of my 5th Army.

At Army Group Headquarters I conferred daily, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, with my Chief of Staff. At these meetings the situation and all the important decisions to which it gave rise were discussed; regulations, orders and proposals were considered, and expositions by specialist officers, information and reports from the numerous visitors representing the army, the navy, diplomacy, industry, commerce, agriculture, science and art, were dealt with. During times of important fighting the time and number of these daily conferences with the Chief of Staff were regulated by the situation. They often took place in his office late at night. Daily telephone conversations with all the armies under my command (commanders-in-chief and chiefs of staff), frequently also with corps headquarters and divisional staffs, served to keep before my mind a vivid and accurate picture of the situation. In my office I had at my disposal a telephone with an intensifying appliance, which ensured a perfectly clear understanding with even the most distant sections of the front. I regard it as a grateful duty to record the amazing skill and alertness of my telephone personnel, whose energies never flagged by day or night. Every evening it was the duty of a general staff officer to make a report on all important telephone messages received during the day.

No one can realize the amount of work dealt with by the Army Group Headquarters Staff up to the end of the war, the unremitting, tremendous mental and physical strain, who has not, like myself, been daily in constant touch with the activities of the staff and all its branches. But even when the situation was most critical, as was not infrequent, the vast organization of work and control always functioned smoothly and noiselessly as a matter of course. Faithful devotion to duty, strict clear-headedness, loyal co-operation as among comrades, untroubled cheerfulness in dealing with the task in hand, tactful suppression of self before the common interest, created from the first to the last day an atmosphere which has stamped indelibly upon my mind this anxious time of common labour and heavy responsibility, common plans, victories and disillusionments, and will bind me for ever to every one of my loyal colleagues.

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With undying gratitude and friendship I mention, in the first place, my loyal Chief of Staff, Colonel Graf von der Schulenburg. A highly-gifted, clever, versatile officer of the old Prussian school, a blameless character and a gentleman in the best sense of the word, unprejudiced and fresh of mind, of unbending perseverance and untiring activity, relentless in facing facts. His never-ruffled calm, his judgment based on deep thought and always given with certainty, combined with a large-hearted understanding for another's views and train of thought, had in the summer of 1916, when he was my first general staff officer before Verdun, made co-operation with him particularly congenial. And so our relations remained up to the end untroubled by the slightest cloud. There was never a sharp word between us ; there was never anything that could have been called a quarrel.

He had pre-eminently the gift, founded on his breadth of view and flair for facts, of correctly judging military situations and measures taken in their immediate effect, their influence on the general position, and their relations to the political situation. During those anxious years we were in complete accord in our clear conviction that Germany and her allies would reach the limit of their capacity and endurance before our enemies, with their inexhaustible resources of manpower and war material, and that it was, therefore, essential for us, in our struggle of desperation, to achieve in good time a tolerable peace. I have repeatedly proposed Count Schulenburg's appointment to an influential position at Main Headquarters rather than that he should be left in his post as Chief of Staff of an Army Group, a responsible post, indeed, but a subordinate one, in which he was dependent on the decisions of higher authority.

At the side of my Chief of Staff stood a number of gifted general staff officers, untiring workers, widely experienced in peace and war. As the Cabinet held to the principles that were the rule in peace-time, frequent changes were unavoidable. The duties of I.a. were at first entrusted to Major Matthias, a member of my staff since the outbreak of the war and tried in every kind of situation ; then for a time to Lieutenant-Colonel Frhr. von Esebeck—already known to fame as General von Mudra's Chief of Staff—and for the greatest part of the time and until the end of the war to Major von



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Bock. This highly-gifted officer, by his imperturbable clear-headedness in times of the most difficult and selfless labour, was a never-failing support to myself and my Chief of Staff. From among the rest of the general staff officers, all without exception tried and loyal men, I mention the distinguished and brilliant Major von Schütz; Major Beck—by his exceptional clear good sense and constant evenness of temper a particularly sympathetic personality—held for a long time the position of I.b.; Captains von Viebahn, Rödenbeck, von Ziegesar, and also the distinguished and conscientious adjutants, Majors von Olberg and Pflugradt; my excellent intelligence officer Captain Anker, Pioneer-General von Mertens and his brilliant colleague Major Schimpff, Major Pieper, experienced in all artillery questions, my careful and untiring clerical officer Captain Liebrecht, and my loyal, exemplary, industrious map officer Captain Schuberth.\*

### REFLECTIONS ON THE ENEMY'S INTENTIONS. MEASURES FOR THE REPULSE OF AN OFFENSIVE

Examination of the enemy's intentions for attack led to the following conclusions: A resumption of the Somme offensive would certainly strike the German front at its most sensitive point. It was, however, made difficult by the nature of the battle zone, which had become a mere waste of shell-holes; an attack was therefore not very probable. Even if it came, we could not put up a stubborn defence in the present positions, which had been occupied and imperfectly consolidated in the stress of severe fighting, but should withdraw at once to the Siegfried line, then in course of construction, and there receive the blow.

On the front of my Army Group there remained the old objective in Champagne: splitting of the German forces in France, and a push forward against the rear communications of the northern half of our Western front. It was therefore necessary to reckon with a great break-through attack against the 3rd Army between Suippes and the Aisne. This possibility was all the more likely since the great entrenched battle-field of 1915 was still available, and only required to be re-occupied by the enemy.

\* I have to thank him for the maps and sketches with which this book is provided.

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There was less probability of a great attack on both sides of Verdun. Here, too, as on the Somme, the scarred battle-field of 1916 and the numerous positions from the time before the Verdun offensive available behind our present first line, where the struggle had broken down, presented obstacles to a rapid break-through. On the other hand, we had always to reckon with short-front attacks against the 5th Army.

There was a further possibility of a double enveloping attack against the left wing of the 5th Army and Army Detachment "C" in the Woivre plain, with the Briey basin as objective.

Metz itself, in the light of our failure against the fortress of Verdun, might be regarded as not threatened. More likely was an attempt to break through on the Lorraine front between Delme and the Vosges. Our positions in Lorraine had always been weakly held, and accordingly not very thoroughly developed. The first objectives of this break-through would be the important Strassburg-Metz railway and the Saarbecken.

An attempt to break through the Vosges front was improbable. Such an attempt to the south through Sundgau would soon be held up by the Rhine. Nevertheless, an attempt with the objective of gaining possession of the rich potash deposits at Wittelsheim and Mülhausen lay within the bounds of possibility.

At the beginning of 1917 no preparations for attack on the part of the enemy were anywhere established. It was therefore necessary to prepare at once for all the possibilities mentioned.

The following measures were especially required: Timely establishment of adequate fresh reserves by the relief of divisions in the trenches, and bringing up of fresh forces for the disposal of Main Headquarters, distribution of these reserves over the whole front of the Army Group with special regard to threatened sectors, intensive training of all reserves with careful regard for proper rest, further consolidation and strengthening of the trench system and provision of fighting trenches everywhere where the possibility of a deep break-through succeeding had to be reckoned with. From this point of view, the army fronts, particularly that of the 5th Army, were thinned all along the line. Reserves were pushed up behind the fronts of Army Detachments A and B, which hitherto had been less

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threatened and the consolidation of which had not been perfected. The artillery withdrawn and the transport were distributed and accommodated in hutments along the railways. Training schools for officers and men, as well as training grounds, were established or extended; all available man power was diverted strictly from activities not vitally necessary to the end in view to the consolidation of our positions.

After the last battles at Verdun, the important lesson had been learnt, in the interest of sparing the troops and the immediate bringing up of reserves, of breaking ruthlessly with the principle of keeping the first line strongly held. Sectors which, as far as could humanly be foreseen, would not resist the ever-increasing power of the enemy's war-machine, were to be at once evacuated, or at least prepared for evacuation when an attack was observed. Thus, for example, in January, 1917, preparations were made for the withdrawal of the front before Verdun, east of the Meuse, to the line Lamogneur-the western edge of the forest of Louvemont, and for the evacuation of the Talou-Rücken. This was to be repaid in the heavy fighting of August, 1917. Finally, the defensive battles of 1916, especially the two attacks on Nivelles, had shown that the defence could only be successfully carried out by the greatest possible distribution in depth, particularly in artillery, machine guns and fighting reserves and by constant careful training and co-operation. In this more mobile defence the greatest weight was laid upon the necessity of issuing clear orders to the men as to the places where they must fight to the death.

From these points of view, the armies had to take in hand preparations, theoretical and practical, for a defensive battle on all threatened fronts. Plans for the defence were to be submitted to the Army Group for examination. The reserves were disposed upon all sections of the battle area likely to be affected, ready for the fighting that was before them.

On the 1st of February, 1917, came the declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare. I have already discussed the adoption of this war measure, in my eyes indispensable. Even though now at last, after years of hesitation and delay, it was to be allowed full, unlimited scope, it appeared to me that the most favourable moment, from a purely military point of view, had passed, as England had meanwhile been allowed sufficient time to adopt defensive measures.

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On 4th February a dispatch from Field Marshal von Hindenburg announced that His Majesty had decided on the withdrawal of the front occupied by Crown Prince Rupprecht's Army Group to the Siegfried line. Owing to the greater severity of the submarine war an earlier opening of the enemy offensive was to be expected. The occupation of the Siegfried line, planned to take place in March, would necessarily increase the pressure against the front of my Army Group.

Amid the most strenuous preparations, the unusually severe winter passed at first without any special fighting. In spite of numerous patrol attacks, minor undertakings and continuous observation of the enemy both from the air and the ground, no definite data had been obtained as to the direction of the expected enemy offensive.

My Chief of Staff and I employed our time in numerous journeys and expeditions lasting the whole day to the armies. The main object of this personal keeping in touch was to make clear throughout the extensive area occupied by the Army Group the principles which were to govern the control and conduct of the troops in the defensive battle, and to ensure their uniform application; to supervise the organization and progress of the defensive operations; to get to know the personalities of the commanding officers and general staff officers down to the divisions, and to inform ourselves, by direct observation, as to the condition of the troops and positions. In all conversations with commanding officers the leading consideration was: how will the enemy conduct the attack? It was to be expected that the method of attack adopted in October, 1916, and still more decisively in December before Verdun by its inventor Nivelle, who had replaced Joffre in the Supreme Command of the French Army, would be renewed and intensified. It consisted substantially in sending forward, after days of the heaviest artillery preparation, deep waves of attacks in strength against isolated sectors of the whole front, there to force a break-through and to compel the less strongly attacked fronts to give way by a surrounding movement through the breaches. In view of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of recognizing in time the probable places at which the break-through was likely to be attempted during a simultaneous artillery preparation along the whole front of attack, it had to be recognized that we should not always be



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able to meet the attempts at a break-through in the first trench line. Hence arose the necessity of fortifying the whole zone, the strength of the positions and the forces holding them increasing towards the rear. Further, on the probably wide front of the whole enemy offensive, as few divisions as possible were to man the trenches with correspondingly more divisions in readiness at the right time close behind the threatened sectors. These divisions, so-called counter-attack divisions, were for offensive purposes, and were to be used for immediate counter-attacks against an enemy who had broken through. This type of mobile and really offensive defence had been recommended by the Army Group very soon after the last reverses at Verdun. Its adoption by official orders from Main Headquarters was the cause of great satisfaction to my Chief of Staff and myself. Had we held to the stiff defence which had hitherto been the rule, I am firmly convinced that we should not have come victoriously through the great defensive battles of 1917.

Up to now the counter-attacks had been only infrequently used, and on a small scale. During the years of monotonous French warfare, the organization of the defence had not always kept pace with the continuous development of the enemy's weight and machinery of attack, the elasticity of the command and the troops themselves had suffered. It was, therefore, frequently necessary to overcome not inconsiderable opposition to the recognition and adoption of the still novel principles of mobile defence. The time available for learning the new lesson, however, was severely limited. Thanks to the energetic intervention and personal activity of the Headquarters Staff, which quickly and effectively infected all subordinate staffs, those obstacles were, at any rate in the main, overcome. In the battle which soon broke loose, the enemy rushed upon a new defensive army, led and fighting with complete unanimity, an army which had learned timely and important lessons from the defensive battles of 1916. Our troops were at that time, thank God, so firm in morale, so permeated with thoughts of victory, that the "Surrender bacillus," which later—in the Autumn of 1918—became so dangerous in many places, could have gained no hold. Among the reasons for our decision to make these drastic changes in our method of conducting the defence, the one which had the final word was the psychological valuation two and a half years of war experience had taught us

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to place upon the French Infantry. We had always, even before the war, avoided undervaluing the French soldier, but we did not form a complete judgment of his qualities and weaknesses until we met him in arms. The strength of his infantry lay not so much in irresistible impetus of attack as in the tenacity and skill with which they fought. As I have already repeatedly stated, they were masters of the skilful use of the ground, the defence of villages, woods and trenches—I will mention only the so-called “Frenchmen’s Nests,” the almost invisible barbed wire entanglements, the perfect skill in the use of machine-guns for flank fire, that they knew how to prepare for us frequent unpleasant and costly surprises by the continual adoption of new fighting methods.

The specific qualities which were so brilliantly displayed by the French infantryman in defence, however, also qualified his attitude in attack. He only advanced when he was more or less certain of success; as a rule, therefore, only when the sister branches of the service, particularly the artillery, had opened the way for him. “The artillery captures the ground, the infantry occupies it,” was a recognized principle. When this was not altogether the case, when the resistance of the enemy infantry proved to be still unbroken, or when other unforeseen circumstances arose, the French officer, in spite of rousing shouts of “*A la baïonnette, en avant, en avant,*” found it very difficult, if not impossible, to carry his men with him and keep the attack going. It is far from my intention to belittle the personal valour of the French Poilu, I put his attitude down, myself, to the prevailing intelligent grasp of his functions. This universal and, with slight variations, repeatedly observed phenomenon forced upon us the necessity of conducting the actual defence with such careful economy of infantry that the advance of the enemy, even if it met with initial success, would quickly encounter unexpected resistance from fresh reserves brought up to the counter attack from the rear and, where possible, be thrown back.

### THE ENEMY’S INTENTIONS BECOME CLEAR

From the middle of February information, particularly the fruit of efficient air-observation by the 3rd Army, formed an irrefutable foundation for the belief that extensive enemy preparations for attack were being carried out in Champagne,

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and between Soissons and Rheims. The evidence of prisoners as to the extent and time of the attack were still contradictory. The evidence of photographs as to the place of attack was also ambiguous. Nevertheless, all the evidence obtained made it clear that only the right wing of the Army Group would be affected by the enemy's Spring offensive. All efforts could be henceforward concentrated in that direction, and on sending thither reinforcements from the fronts of the 5th Army and Army Detachments C, A and B, which would become subsidiary fronts. Extensive enemy preparations for attack were also observed on the west front of Rupprecht's Army Group.

Main Headquarters prepared to meet this enemy activity by a reorganization of Command. The 7th Army was attached to my Army Group on 1st March. This ensured unity of the defence on the front from Soissons to the Argonne. At the same time the Army Group of Duke Albrecht of Württemberg was formed out of Army Detachments A and B.

In this way the centre of gravity of the Headquarters Staff's activity shifted to the west. It became necessary to transfer Headquarters from Stenay to Charleville. The move from Stenay, where I had spent two and a half hard and anxious years of war, took place on 7th March. A few weeks later, on 12th April, Army Detachment C also left the Army Group and was transferred to Duke Albrecht's Army Group. A brilliant advance carried out in the sector of the 3rd Army, south of Ripont, on 3rd March by the 51st R.D. brought us, in addition to considerable booty, into possession of the French Army Order: "Memorandum of the objective and preliminary conditions for a general offensive." It had been drawn up by Nivelles on 16th December, 1916. This memorandum contained matter of extraordinary value. It made clear that this time there would be no question of a limited attack, but a break-through offensive on a grand scale was contemplated. The conjectures as to the nature of the expected attack, upon which the Army Group's defence preparations had hitherto been based, were confirmed. The memorandum brought important disclosures above all as to the particular nature of the surprise which the attacker had in view. This was based on the fact alleged to have been observed on our side, that our defensive artillery as a rule made only a weak reply

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to the artillery preparation which preceded the attack. The French, therefore, thought to avoid protracted digging of earthworks for the attacking troops, particularly the artillery. I regard it as an indisputable personal triumph on the part of Graf Schulenburg that he at once formulated the logical reply for the defence: the enemy artillery preparation not only to be powerfully returned, but even beforehand all recognized enemy preparations for attack to be overwhelmed by concentrated artillery-fire. We ventured to hope that the surprise might in this way be most effectively met, and the sting taken out of the first attack, which experience had shown to be the strongest and best prepared.

The addition of the 7th Army to my Command called for fresh work. The necessity for this was made clear to me by a tour of inspection to its front. Since the end of 1914 no extensive fighting had taken place on its front. It had, therefore, come to be regarded as a peaceful front, characterized by all the defects of a subsidiary front: insufficient and antiquated trench-systems weakly held, inadequate railway and road facilities and poor transport and supply organization. It is due to the vigorous efforts of General von Boehn, who, meanwhile, had been appointed Commander-in-Chief and who was experienced in all kinds of situations, to the work of his Chief of Staff, Colonel Reinhardt, and the excellent first General Staff Officer, Major von Blonberg, that these deficiencies were in great part removed before the opening of the battle.

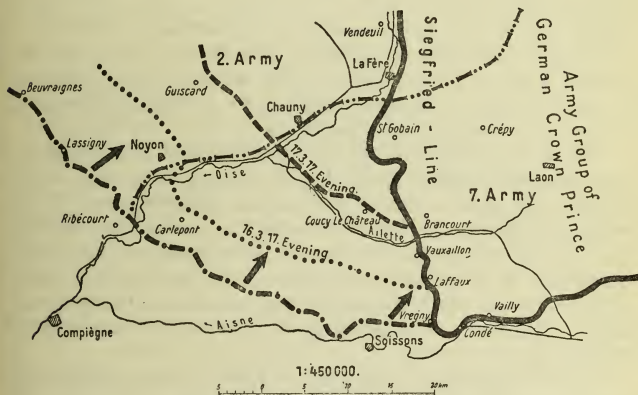
At the beginning of March the French preparations for attack indicated by photographs reached such a scale that a considerable reinforcement of the 7th and 1st Armies in infantry, machine-guns, artillery, battle-planes, intelligence service and labour battalions was necessary. The opening of the enemy attack, which at first had been expected to take place in February, was, however, still deferred. The persistence of the unfavourable weather, severe frost and snow caused valuable gain of time.

On the 16th March the withdrawal to the Siegfried line began. Of my Army Group only the right wing of the 7th Army took part. The movement could be begun before the great and apparently imminent attack against the front of Rupprecht's Army Group opened. This attack was, as we already knew from enemy literature, to have begun in co-



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operation, both in time and strategy, with the attack against my Army Group. The Siegfried movement created for the enemy a new, surprising and uncomfortable situation. The combined Franco-English plan of attack had been rendered to a great extent abortive. Fresh grouping became necessary. This gain of time was also of advantage to the defence. Divisions, artillery and strong labour parties from the Siegfried line were freed for use in other places, and could be brought up. Part of this labour was employed in expediting the consolidation of a strategic position behind the 7th Army (the Hunding



SKETCH 5.—The Siegfried Movement.

line) by using the Serre sector, behind the 7th Army (Brunhild line) by using the Aisne. Army Headquarters Staff I. (Infantry General Fritz von Below) was released from Rupprecht's Army Group and placed by Main Headquarters at the disposal of my Army Group for service on the broad defence line between the 7th and 3rd Armies.

We had also to take into account that with the enemy also strong forces released by the Siegfried movement would soon be available in other places.

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## DEVELOPMENT OF THE BATTLE ON THE AISNE AND IN CHAMPAGNE

So April came on. A great deal of information already obtained led to the conclusion that the main attack was to be expected before long against the south front of the 7th and 3rd Armies, west of the Argonne. The intelligence service further confirmed the impression left by the French memorandum of attack which had been captured; great depth of artillery, enormous supplies of ammunition, innumerable battery positions directly behind the enemy's first line, no strong fortification of battery positions, simply cover from enemy's view, complete cessation of hostilities.

On the 2nd April the advance of artillery for the attack, and the firing of a few rounds to get the range, was observed by the 7th Army. The preparations for the offensive seemed to have reached a certain finality.

On the 5th April a clever attack by the 10th R.D. at Sapigneul brought us into possession of an order of attack of the French 5th Army. In it the French attacking units were mentioned by name. The 5th Army's objective was the line Prouvais-Proviseux-Aumenancourt. The Brimont was to be taken by an enveloping movement from the north. Fresh confirmation of the anticipated French method of attack was given; the last veil concealing the intention of the French offensive was torn aside.

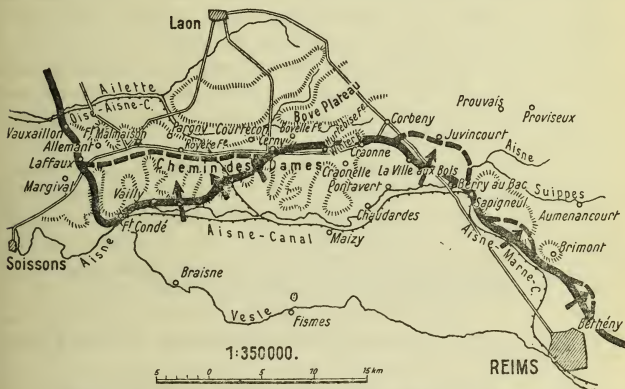
On the evening of 5th April enemy artillery activity in front of the 7th and 3rd Armies increased for the first time to great strength.

On the 6th April the French opened the artillery battle from Soissons as far as the centre of the 3rd Army over a front of about 100 kilometres. In the evening of that day a concentrated air attack was made on the balloons of the 7th and 3rd Armies. The battle had begun. It could not yet be ascertained whether the enemy attack was to be made against the whole front engaged by their artillery. Nor was its eastern limit clear. It might develop as far as Aubérive on the Suippes, possibly even to the Suippes-Somme-Py road. The breadth of front engaged by the artillery justified the conjecture that considerable sectors would be spared by the infantry attack with a view to enveloping them later on from the rear. Which

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sectors these were was for the time being unknown. The fixing of the eastern limit was made more difficult by the former enemy plans of attack of 1915 between the Suippes and the Aisne. The expected transfer of enemy forces, released by our withdrawal to the Siegfried line, from the Oise front to the Rheims front was reported. These forces might be intended to serve as reserves or to fill some gap, or they might very well be required to extend the line eastwards.

The breadth over which the artillery battle developed necessitated the immediate establishment of Army Headquarters



SKETCH 6.—The Battle on the Aisne in April and May, 1917.

Staff I. between the 7th and 3rd Armies. Placed at our disposal on the 12th April by Main Headquarters, it was immediately made use of and entrusted with the defence line from the Laon hills to the Suippes at Aubérive. The assumption of command by General Fritz von Below, who was highly esteemed by me on account of his brilliant soldierly qualities, could not be effected before noon of the 16th, when the infantry battle with the 7th Army was already in progress.

On the 9th the English offensive against the 6th Army at Arras began. The strategic objective of the combined Anglo-French effort was thereby made clear. The Siegfried line was to be buckled by two break-through attacks on its flanks and rear, the way opened for strong reserves to the rear of

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the German West front, and the war of movement forced into being. The centre of gravity was without doubt the French Group. This was indicated by the direction towards which the attack was working, the broad front on which the French were opening their attack, and the number and massing of the enemy reserves. It had been learnt that a special "Armée de Poursuite," to take strategic advantage of the break-through, was mustered in the neighbourhood of Fismes.

The weight of the enemy artillery and mine bombardment increased from day to day. From 10th of April the enemy tested our front line with strong reconnaissance detachments along the whole front of attack. The trenches became a waste of craters, our losses mounted up. Our men's nerves had already been gradually stretched to the breaking-point by the long wait for the attack; nevertheless, the morale and bearing of the troops remained good and reliable. His Majesty telegraphed to me on the 14th: "Your armies are undergoing heavy artillery bombardment. The great French infantry attack is hourly awaited. All Germany is watching expectantly her brave sons. Greet them from me. My thoughts are with you."

On the 15th a fresh enemy air attack took place against the balloons of the 7th Army.

### THE DEFENSIVE VICTORY ON THE AISNE AND IN CHAMPAGNE

At last, on the 16th, the enemy infantry advanced to the attack over a breadth of 40 kilometres from Condé to Brimont, north of Rheims. This advance had been preceded by a bombardment of unprecedented weight. The enemy came on in deep masses, supported on the right wing by about sixty tanks. The tremendous onslaught broke down completely. Almost everywhere the troops held their first trenches or held up the attack in prepared positions close behind. Only in the plain bordered by the Laon hills was a narrow break effected, scarcely three kilometres wide. The splendid resistance of the 10th R.D., stiffened by the 4th I.D. on Hill 108 at Berry-aubac, and the resolute counter attacks of the counter-attack divisions who had been held ready, close at hand—the 50th I.D. and the Guard Ersatz Division, tried, brilliantly-led troops—here, too, prevented a deeper penetration, and threw back the enemy a considerable distance. By noon the French



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had already sent up a great part of their divisions of the second attack. In vain. When the dusk of evening compassionately spread its shadows over the horrors of this bloody Spring day, it was clear that a complete defensive victory had been won.

While on the 17th April the enemy was exhausting himself fruitlessly on the previous day's battlefield in isolated thrusts, particularly against the fronts held by General Sieger's 16th R.D. and General Burekhardt's Bavarian Ersatz Division at Craonelle and Craonne, the French in Champagne also advanced to the attack over a twenty km. front, from the Berru Massif (north-west of Rheims) to the Suippes valley at



SKETCH 7.—The Battle in Champagne in April and May, 1917.

Aubérive. Favoured by the nature of the ground, thick weather and snow squalls, his attack at first gained some ground. Part of the dominating heights of Moronvillers were scaled. But here, too, it was found possible, with the support of flank artillery fire from the fronts north of Rheims and east of Suippes, which were not being attacked, to stop the enemy from advancing beyond the heights.

The French offensive was, therefore, on both days brought to a standstill at the outset. It was soon to be apparent that the 16th and 17th April had decided the issue. In this, the offensive shared the fate of all attacks in the trench warfare

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on the Western Front. Success stands or falls with the issue of the first onslaught. Nevertheless, the battle was by no means ended. For much more than a month there developed prolonged bitter fighting, along practically the whole of the extensive battle-field. Supported by inexhaustible reserves of ammunition, the enemy pressed upon our front in numerous minor attacks. From time to time these were made in great breadth after days of the heaviest artillery preparation; for instance, on the 30th of April, against the heights of Moronvillers, on 4th May against the 1st Army's front between the Aisne and Brimont, and from the 4th to the 6th of May against the Winterberg, north-west of Craonne, and the mountain front of the 7th Army. All attacks failed with heavy enemy losses, and only here and there resulted in a slight modification of our first trench system.

With the 7th Army, during the following days, our position on the northern edge of the Winterberg continued to be the hottest point of the battle. From the 22nd to the 24th May strong French attacks were once more repeated between Cerny and Winterberg, with equal lack of success. From the 25th May onwards we, in our turn, changed our tactics by carefully prepared short-front thrusts, whereby we improved our line in many places. Meanwhile the French in Champagne continued their offensive against the left wing of the 1st Army, with undiminished strength, especially against the hill positions south of the line Nauroy-Moronvillers. On the 24th May a united attack brought the whole position from the Cornilett to the Pöhl hill into their hands; but the counter-thrust of our reserves wrenched back from the enemy a great part of the ground he had gained. On the whole, I regarded the defence on the front of the 1st Army as another complete success.

It was not until the end of May that the fighting by both armies began to die down again. According to our calculation, sixty-five French divisions had been thrown into the battle from the middle of April until the end of May, and more or less successfully driven off.

We know to-day from French sources, particularly from the book of the then French Minister of War, Painlevé, on the offensive of the 16th and 17th of April, what hopes the French Generalissimo had staked on the combined Franco-English

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Spring offensive. Field-Marshal Haig had been placed under Nivelle to this end. Nivelle's brief order of the day, issued on the eve of the attack to the French armies, which fell into our hands, "The hour has come! Courage and confidence! Long live France!" gives the key to the spirit and temper prevailing at French Headquarters, as well as their summing-up of the situation shortly before the opening of the great Spring offensive. The hope that this battle would prove the turning-point of the war, that the hour might be at hand, was not unjustified. The French preparations had been carried out on a hitherto unparalleled scale. Then at the last moment came America's entry into the war, and the short-lived success of the English at Arras. In front of my Army Group alone eighty infantry divisions and seven cavalry divisions stood ready to advance.

But in spite of all preparations, in spite of all the force available, the hoped-for success did not materialize. The fact that, as a result of the increasing pressure during the night between the 17th and 18th of April, the evacuation of the Condé corner, and the withdrawal on both sides of Fort Malmaison to the Siegfried line, as well as the giving up of a projecting trench line at Ville-aux-Bois was ordered and carried through according to plan, made no difference to the result. The bloody losses of the French, according to Painlevé's figures, amounted between the 16th and 25th of April to between 33,000 and 34,000 killed and 84,000 wounded. The commander of a machine-gun company of the Guards E.D., who conducted themselves so brilliantly as a counter-attack division during those terrible days at Brimont, described to me the staggering spectacle presented by the battle-field on which France's best regiments, advancing again and again in fruitless attacks, were smashed to pieces. Nivelle lost his position, and was succeeded by General Pétain, who had won such fame in the battle of Verdun. The French press at that time spoke of Nivelle as the *buveur de sang*! Indeed, he was a soldier hewn from tough wood, inspired by burning determination to win, and ruthless energy, a nature similar to Yorek and Steinmetz of the Prussian Army. With the appointment of Pétain a strategy aimed at limited objectives and sure results on a smaller scale became the leading characteristic of the French conduct of the war.

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More severe almost than the losses were the moral effects of the defeat. The French Army, after the failure of this battle, went through the most serious internal crisis of the whole campaign. As early as the summer we heard of units and divisions mutinying. We could not at that time, of course, gain any accurate idea of the full extent of this moral set-back. Not until now have we gained a clear insight through the medium of enemy publications. It was only by measures of draconian severity, such as were never employed for centuries by the much-maligned Prusso-German militarism, that discipline and order could be restored. General Pershing's recently published account of the war makes clear the significance of the defeat. He says: "The relatively low strength of the Germans on the Western Front induced the Allies to seek a decision on this front with greater confidence. But the losses were very severe and their efforts miscarried completely. This failure had a very serious effect on the army and at home, particularly on the French morale. Attempts to force the decision by extensive or combined operations were finally abandoned."

The victory on the Aisne—the Champagne battle—one of the most brilliant achievements of the whole war, was due to the incomparable heroism of the troops and their leaders. The strenuous preparation of the winter had been rewarded. The result proved how correct were the defensive principles adopted. If the enemy attack in Champagne had not from the outset been defeated with equal success by the 7th Army, this was due, amongst other unfavourable circumstances, to the fact that the progress of the preparations and the extent of the attack here had not been so early and so accurately observed, with the result that the bringing up and throwing into the battle of fresh forces was in part delayed.

We submitted to Main Headquarters the suggestion that the victory gained should be exploited by a counter-attack, which promised to have a far-reaching moral effect on the French Army and nation. Unfortunately, however, Main Headquarters lacked the necessary forces, as, firstly in the East, in spite of the Russian revolution, releases of troops from that area had still to be awaited; secondly, because the front opposing the English, whose attacking power had not yet been broken, required strong support from the reserves



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available. The abandonment of the counter-attack was a serious matter to my Army Group. Had the general situation at that time allowed Main Headquarters to neglect all the other theatres of war in favour of trying for a decision in the West, I am convinced that it would have been in our favour. We could then have obtained an acceptable peace. But Main Headquarters cannot be censured for taking the view that the premises for such a decision had not been realized.

### REFLECTIONS UPON, AND MEASURES FOR, THE CONTINUANCE OF THE DEFENCE

With the conclusion of the Spring battle a fresh examination was required of the lines along which the defence was to be continued.

The greatness of the defensive victory achieved, and its consequences to the French plans of operations, could not be observed with the finality that is possible to-day. It had to be assumed that a second decisive effort on the part of the English and French would soon follow. The political situation in Russia was still continuing to grow more and more unfavourable, and the initial successes of the unrestricted submarine campaign forced the enemy to take action. Even if France, in the expectation of American help, was opposed to a continuance of the offensive in 1917, England could not wait. Fresh defensive battles had, therefore, to be reckoned with.

The question arose whether these could be fought with prospects of success in the positions of the 7th and 1st Armies, which had undergone alteration in the Aisne-Champagne battle. Our newly-gained experience had to be turned to account, and the further development of two weapons, gas and the tanks, had to be taken into consideration.

The fighting positions of the 7th and 1st Armies at the close of the battle no longer bore out the conditions which in future seemed essential for a successful defence. Defenders and attackers were usually within hand-grenade range of each other. The south front of the 7th Army had been pressed back to the hill line of the Chemin-des-Dames, and had lost the necessary depth. Before the 1st Army the enemy had captured the Heights of Moronvillers. Our first line of trenches lay exposed in front of them. Moreover, the heights afforded a dominating point for observation over the territory far

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behind the 1st and 3rd Armies. The Aisne-Champagne battle had, more than any earlier important battle, driven home the importance of depth of front in defence.

The more crushing the artillery and mine fire, the more carefully prepared the first enemy onslaught upon the defence expected in the front line, the more the defence had to consider the importance of withdrawing the main resistance from out of the most threatened zone. Resistance to the death should only be offered where it might be expected that the enemy would be already weakened and disorganized by the long advance. When the main resistance had reached its culmination, the enemy was to be attacked. In this defence it was vitally important to decide carefully, according to the nature of the ground and the conditions of the trenches, on the zone where the decisive resistance was to take place, and that the "main resistance line" should be made clear beyond possibility of doubt to the troops and their leaders.

An improvement in the fighting zone of the 7th and 1st Armies was, therefore, essential. It might be sought in front by attack, or the necessary depth might be gained by fixing the line of main resistance further in the rear.

The solution through attack was a question of man-power and munitions. The fixing of the main resistance further in the rear would, sooner or later, give the enemy possession of ground for which he had hitherto striven in vain.

For instance, on the south front of the 7th Army the abandonment of the Chemin-des-Dames subsequently allowed him a cheap success, the moral significance of which was not to be underrated.

As it could not be determined whether the general situation would allow us sufficient strength to enable us to attack, both solutions were worked out by the Army Group. The case for an attack by the 7th Army was governed by the intention to extend the objective and push forward the trench line to the Aisne. This way promised the possibility of a great tactical success. In view of the lowered French morale this might be of importance. To have the Aisne on our front would, moreover, mean the gain of a strong permanent position which might presumably be regarded as eliminated as a great battle front in future. The objective of an attack by the 1st Army would be the regaining of all the hill country

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to about the Rheims-St. Ménehould. If the forces for the attack failed to materialize, the main resistance of the 7th Army was to be withdrawn to the position north of the Ailette valley, the preparation of which had already begun. For the 1st Army an already available position on the line Berru Massif-Dontrien had been decided upon. As in the case of this line the Heights of Moronvillers could not be entirely left out of account, it was at the same time necessary to prepare for a withdrawal of the front behind the strong Suippes sector. A withdrawal behind the Suippes would certainly involve giving up the Berru Massif and Brimont.

The general situation soon made clear the necessity of preparing for a third possibility. After the crisis of the battle had been successfully passed, the Army Group had been obliged reluctantly to release considerable forces for service elsewhere. Main Headquarters now demanded further big releases for Galicia and for the Flanders battle, which was being prepared for on the front of Rupprecht's Army Group. The possibility had, therefore, to be faced that Main Headquarters would not be in a position to spare any reinforcements for beating off a fresh grand attack by the French. The surviving strength of my Army Group was at that time insufficient for a fresh defensive battle. If such a one was in preparation, it could not be resisted. The only alternative was to give way before it. The withdrawal would be planned to take place gradually, in proportion to the French pressure, by sectors and only on the front attacked. It could, if necessary, be extended to the line which was being prepared between the Serre and the Aisne, to which the two rivers gave great strategic strength. The only place where there could be no question of a withdrawal on a large scale was east of the Argonne. The 5th Army was the corner pillar of the Western Front at its point of greatest strain. Any considerable yielding of ground here might have serious consequences for the whole Western Front. Withdrawal before an enemy grand attack, if necessary, was, therefore, to be confined to the 7th, 1st and 3rd Armies.

The technical preparations for the withdrawal called for the extension and repair of tactical and strategic points of resistance, rapid completion of strategic positions, for the strengthening of which extensive preparations for flooding

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were undertaken, repair and extension of railways, supply organization of all kinds—in short, the fullest possible employment of all our labour resources for many months. The tactical preparations could be based on the experiences of the Siegfried movement; thus in the summer of 1917, under the pseudonym “Gudrun,” the preparations for the withdrawal of the 7th, 1st and 3rd Armies, of great importance in the second half of 1918, began.

Our decisions with regard to the conduct of the defence with which we were faced, in view of the uncertainty as to the right time for strengthening the defensive fronts in the summer of 1917, touch on questions which are of importance for judging the general defence of the whole West front. If to-day, after the result has been decided and events can be seen in better perspective, one or another of the decisions taken in the course of the last years of war may perhaps be seen to have been inexpedient, this is often merely wisdom after the event. The difficulties and obstacles in the way of reaching a decision are easily undervalued or overlooked.

So long as there was a prospect of a solution by attack it was imperative to concentrate upon it. In doing so, it was necessary to make an extensive survey of the forces available. The Army Group was, in general, not in a position to do this. Main Headquarters alone could and must. Even in their case it was made difficult by the vast extent of the various theatres of war and the many unforeseen changes of situation within them. My Chief of Staff and I continually devoted ourselves to reflection upon the continuance of the defence in the West and of the offensive operations in the other theatres of war. The realization that we had to solve the daily increasing problems of defence with inadequate forces, with exhausted and war-weary divisions, was often a severe strain on our nerves and on the necessary soldierly submission to orders from above.

The theory of the elastic defence which was, in course of time, further developed by the creation of advanced and main-resistance zones, and the fundamentally different methods of fighting to be adopted by the troops in these zones respectively, had not entirely justified itself in practice. Nevertheless, in view of the ever-increasing weight of the attack, to which was added the employment of strong Tank squadrons, it was without doubt right in principle, but it was dependent upon



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strictly-disciplined, well-trained and skilfully-led troops. As the war progressed, these conditions became increasingly difficult to fulfil. Further, the yielding of ground entailed by the principle of keeping the main-resistance line well back, often met with strong opposition among the troops and their officers who had won this ground by heroic fighting and found difficulty in grasping the essential importance of such a measure in terms of the general situation. It was the business of the Supreme Command in these cases to overcome these quite understandable moral difficulties, to take over the responsibility from subordinate authority and to issue orders at the right time and without regard to any other considerations. This, too, did not always happen.

Giving way before recognized attack and strategic withdrawal were made difficult by the increasing immobility of the troops. Both required to ensure their successful achievement months of preparation and unsparing labour. For this there was often neither time nor resources. The multiplicity of duties which increased with the increasing intensity of the war, the change from attack to defence and from defence to attack, particularly in the last year of the war, made it difficult to adhere to and carry through plans which required prolonged preparation. When evacuations of the line or strategic withdrawals became inevitable, trenches and shelters, not infrequently prepared by years of labour, and furnished with all sorts of appliances, had to be given up before support further in the rear could be reached. After the withdrawal, which in itself is the most difficult task any troops can undertake, and submits their morale to the severest test, there began the exhausting reconsolidation behind the ground that had been yielded to the enemy. As it turned out, the troops did not always prove equal to this severe test.

Decisions as to the conduct of the defence, together with detailed reports of the situation, were submitted for the approval of Main Headquarters. They expressed their complete approval. They were, however, unable to provide the reinforcements required for an advance to the Aisne and the recapture of the Moronvillers Heights.

### SITUATION OF THE ARMY GROUP IN THE SUMMER OF 1917

Meanwhile the situation of the 7th Army had not changed

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to any appreciable extent. By skilful use of the strength still remaining to them, this army had succeeded by numerous successful minor attacks in effecting a considerable improvement in their fighting positions. The hill line of the Chemin-des-Dames had gradually come back into their undisputed possession. The victorious enterprises at Vauxaillon, Allemont, Pargny, Royères Fe, Courtecon, Bovel Fe, Hurtebise Fe, Winterberg, Craonne, etc., were triumphs both for the troops and the command. I should like to mention as particularly distinguished the achievements of Army Headquarters Staff 54—General Kühne and his untiring Chief of Staff, von Klewitz.

Moreover, news as to the demoralization of the French troops and the general depression in France continued to come in. It, therefore, appeared tactically correct and, having regard to the easing of the tension on the Flanders front, imperative that no relief should be allowed on the 7th Army's south front. Accordingly, the idea of setting back the main-resistance line behind the Ailette was abandoned. The army received orders to hold the Chemin-des-Dames and improve their position by short front attacks.

Many and frequently successful minor attacks had also taken place on the front of the 1st Army. They had no effect on the situation. Orders were therefore given for the line of main resistance to be withdrawn to the line Berru Massif-Dontrien. It was not expected that this order could be obeyed for some considerable time. Considerable preparatory work was necessary which, in view of the enemy's wide field of observation, was only possible at night.

There was no further attempt at a second combined breakthrough offensive by the French and English in 1917. Field-Marshal Haig, to whom credit must be allowed for having pursued his objective with true British tenacity and energy, again led the English Army, strengthened by a few French divisions, into a first-order battle in Flanders in the second half of the year. The objective of the operation was the destruction of our submarine base on the Flanders coast. The French co-operation, for the rest, was confined to relief-attacks with limited objectives. The French, after the Aisne-Champagne battle, were no longer capable of a great strategic effort.

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In August the 5th Army was attacked on both sides of the Meuse, and in October an enveloping attack was made against the 7th Army in the projecting salient of their western and southern front. Both attacks indicated a return to the former tactics of Nivelle before Verdun. General Pétain's leading idea was to attack only when sure of success. The premises for this were ensured by further increase of material and by skilful selection of the points of attack. Difficulties on our side in coming to a decision as to the conduct of the defence contributed, together with the enemy's careful and skilful preparations, to the realization of Pétain's hopes.

Nearly three years of constant trench warfare in the same area had fundamentally changed the battlefield on both sides. While the defence had been developing an ever deeper network of trenches and great numbers of positions from which attacks could be launched had arisen in front of nearly all the important fighting fronts of the Army Group. With their help the attack could reduce and conceal the preparations for his artillery attacks, thus saving time. For the defence they increased the difficulty of observing the enemy's intentions and determining in time the position at which resistance would be required.

Nevertheless, careful observation of the enemy had, in June, revealed indications of French preparation for attack on the north-west and north-east Verdun fronts. These indications increased in July and the beginning of August. The imminence of an attack on both banks of the Meuse from the line Avocourt-Bezonvaux became increasingly clear.

After the great sacrifices of the summer, the fighting strength of the Army Group was below standard. The pressure on the south front of the 7th Army and on the 1st Army east of Rheims had not relaxed. After the opening of the English offensive in Flanders, French relief-attacks were to be anticipated. The simultaneous reinforcement of all fronts was not possible. A decision had to be taken. The only course open was to reinforce the front of the 5th Army, the most threatened, at the expense of the rest, and to strip the latter relentlessly. A tolerable permanent position had been established on the south front. This had made it possible to weaken the army temporarily. The 1st Army was preparing for a withdrawal by sectors behind the Suippes. The 3rd Army seemed the least threatened. The 1st and 3rd Army could, therefore, be subjected to further

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drastic sacrifices in favour of the 5th. In this way it was found possible, in the main, to provide the defensive strength required by the 5th Army from forces within the Army Group.

### FIGHTING AT VERDUN IN AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER

The importance of the 5th Army's holding the ground in its possession has been mentioned. Further withdrawal of the point of main-resistance or a retirement without fighting was not possible on the east bank of the Meuse, in view of the known imminence of the enemy grand offensive. The northern projection of the Lorraine Côte had to be held; otherwise it would be necessary to reckon with a gradual pressing back of the 5th Army into the Woevre plain. This, however, would have involved a serious menace to Army Detachment C, and at the same time to the Erzbecken of Briey as well as the loss of the railway Metz-Montmédy-Sedan, which was essential to the 5th and 3rd, and later the 1st Armies. West of the Meuse a withdrawal of the line of main-resistance behind the strong Forges sector would bring us back to the original position of February, 1916. The loss of ground involved in this was not of vital importance. The withdrawal behind the Forges would, however, necessarily involve giving into the enemy's hands Hill 304 and the "Mort Homme." Much blood had been lost here. Continuous bitter fighting, lasting until the first half of August of this year, had so far ensured their possession. After the December defeat of 1916 the idea of giving up this costly sector had already been mooted. For reasons of morale and to avoid relaxing the pressure on the enemy front the idea had been rejected by higher authority. Now it was taken up afresh. It was probable that it would be difficult to maintain lines of communication for a battle round this powerful hill position across the deep line, broad Forges Valley, exposed as it was to enemy artillery and gas. Reasons of morale, to us unconvincing, again turned the scale in favour of rejecting the idea of evacuation. Subsequent events were to show that, in view of the enemy's increased weight of attack, a well-timed withdrawal behind the Forges Valley would have been the more correct decision.

On the 4th August the French began to push forward their positions towards the Talou Ridge, on the east bank of the Meuse. It had escaped their observation that this broad hill



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position had, since the previous February, been held only quite weakly as an advanced line. On the 11th August unusual activity in the air and on the ground betrayed the fact that the enemy preparations had reached their conclusion. On the 12th the artillery bombardment began over a front of thirty kilometres. It was carried out with tremendous strength by guns of the heaviest calibre and longest range, gas being also employed.

The necessary strength for interrupting the enemy's preparations by means of an attack from our side was not available. Only on the Rücken, reaching towards Douaumont Village, General Langer's 28th I.D. succeeded in breaking up the enemy advance by a victorious thrust into the Carrière Wood. This division, which was to form the pivot of the attacked front on the slope of the Côte down to the Woivre Plain, improved its position considerably by this attack.

At dawn on the 20th, after a week's artillery bombardment, the advance began on the front Avocourt-Bezonvaux. The infantry battle raged throughout the whole day. Hill 304 was captured. The "Mort Homme" was lost after a brave defence. The reserves brought up for its recapture were attacked as they began their advance over the Forges Valley and rendered ineffectual. The counter-attack failed.

On the east bank the enemy had advanced over the Talou-Rücken without meeting with any resistance. The troops and their officers, insufficiently trained in the practical employment of zone tactics, had evacuated the advanced positions of the first line system too early. The defence was pressed back over the line of main-resistance to the line Samogneux-Beaumont. The rest of the front held. The loss of ground on the eastern bank was small as the evacuation of the Talou-Rücken was included in the plans of the defence.

On the western bank the failure of the attempt to recapture the "Mort Homme" led to the decision to abandon Hill 304. The evacuation took place, unobserved by the enemy, during the night of the 21st-22nd. The empty nest was attacked by the French on the 22nd after heavy artillery preparation. The front withdrawn behind the Forges Valley was safe from further important fighting. On the east bank of the Meuse the enemy pressure continued for the moment. On the 8th and 10th September, after days of artillery preparation over

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a broad front, the French made repeated disconnected attacks. Heroic resistance, especially by the Würtemberg and Hessian Divisions and the incomparably brave Baden 28th I.D., recaptured the first line trenches again and again or improved upon them. The sacrifices on both sides were heavy. When at the end of September, in terrible weather conditions, the fighting died down, the position on the east bank of the Meuse was still strained. The centre of gravity of the defence had meanwhile shifted further west.

### FIGHTING ON THE FRONT OF THE 7TH ARMY IN OCTOBER

While the Battle of Verdun was still in full swing indications began to be apparent of the reopening of the French offensive against the 7th Army. This time the blow was preparing against their projecting front at Laffaux. By the middle of September the enemy's artillery activity, at times of the heaviest order, had begun.

The command of the 7th Army was also faced with a serious decision. The preliminary conditions for an enemy enveloping attack against the Laffaux corner were favourable. The whole Chemin-des-Dames front would stand or fall according as this position was held or lost. This position lay on the Siegfried line. Valuable entrenchments were available and strengthened its capacity for defence. If the Laffaux corner, and with it the Chemin-des-Dames, were lost, the enemy would gain the objective for which he had struggled to no purpose on the Aisne. The front of the 7th Army on the Chemin-des-Dames had taken months of victorious fighting to establish. Both the command and troops were thoroughly acquainted by long experience with this blood-drenched battle-field. They were proudly confident of their ability to hold back victoriously another attack as they had done in the past. The general strategic situation promised a transition from the years of defensive warfare to an offensive in the following year. The Army Group, therefore, gave orders for this army to fight in the line they were then holding. Here, too, the result proved the incorrectness of this decision.

The opening of the expected attack was delayed until the second half of October. What were the reasons for this delay is not known with certainty. It appears that Pétain was in favour of a strategy of delay until American help could be

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brought to bear and the supply of war material greatly increased, and wanted to allow time for the minor attacks which were part of the plan. The artillery attack did not begin until the 17th October. It extended from the plateau of St. Gobain to the Winterberg. The massed use of artillery, mines and gas exceeded that at Verdun. Favoured by the windless, misty weather, a dense gas attack was carried out in the Ailette Valley, between Vauxaillon and Braye, in rear of the first fighting line. In the last days preceding the infantry attack practically all touch was lost in that direction. Aeroplanes had to be sent to drop ammunition and supplies. On the 23rd came the simultaneous enveloping attack by eight divisions against the Laffaux corner. Accompanied by tanks the enemy succeeded in breaking through the front, which was weak in places, at the juncture of two divisions. The lines, which had been held with admirable bravery, particularly by General Von Borries's 13th I.D., were rolled up from the flank and rear. Gas, fog, smoke and the interruption for days of almost all communication hampered the transmission of orders and co-operation, even among the troops holding the infantry firing trenches. These, too, were broken through in places. The "Counter-attack" reserves brought up for the counter-attack could not master the difficult situation in time. Part of the artillery was lost. Nothing remained but to consolidate a new front behind the Aisne-Oise canal, which cut the Laffaux corner obliquely, with fresh troops, and to withdraw the first line of defence to that position. This movement was successfully carried through in the night of the 25th-26th October, in spite of continued heavy enemy pressure.

The evacuation of the Chemin-des-Dames was henceforth only a question of time. Very soon fresh preparations on a large scale were observed among the enemy on the south front dominating the Chemin-des-Dames. The attack was obviously to be made from a western and south-western direction by using the plateau of Fort Malmaison, which offered a base for the launch of a flanking movement. In spite of the fact that heavy minor attacks had hitherto been victoriously repulsed by General v. d. Osten's 5th Guard I.D. and General von Eichendorff's 47th R.D. (supremely brave troops), covering the extreme flank, orders were given on the 27th by Main Headquarters for the withdrawal of the front behind the

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Ailette. After most careful preparation this short withdrawal was carried out during the night of the 1st-2nd November unobserved by the enemy. The south front of the 7th Army now again stood firm behind a strong sector which quickly brought the fighting to an end.

The Battles of Verdun and Laffaux had shown that, with good leading, an attack on a limited front and with limited objectives must succeed if superiority of strength is assured by the massed employment of material, ammunition and troops.

Apart from a French minor attack at Verdun on the 25th November against the Samogneux position on Hill 344, east of the Meuse, November brought a complete lull. This soon spread over the whole Western front. Even the English tank attack at Cambrai on the 20th November, to which the 2nd Army replied by a victorious counter-attack on the 30th, was only an offshoot of the frustrated Flanders offensive.

At New Year, 1917-18, I issued the following army order to my brave troops :

"The year 1917 belongs to history, and with it the deeds of arms of my Army Group.

"The French Army, on the Aisne and in Champagne, stood concentrated for a great decisive blow. Overwhelming superiority in men, arms, and ammunition was to have enabled the enemy to force a success. Before your loyalty and valour the attack collapsed with bloody losses. By this you have broken the enemy's power and opened the way to victory for German arms in Russia and Italy. In a stern struggle, relying on your own strength alone, your self-sacrificing courage in the heavy fighting on the Chemin-des-Dames, in Champagne and on the blood-drenched fields of Verdun has given support to the storming armies in the east and south. In loyal comradeship you have also fought for Germany's honour in Flanders and at Cambrai.

"Proudly, and with a grateful heart, I look to-day towards you, my valiant, confident officers and my heroic troops. With unstained shield and sharp sword we stand round our Imperial Master on the threshold of a new year of war ready to fight and win. May God be with us."



## CHAPTER XI

### THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE IN 1918

#### THE GERMAN PLAN OF ATTACK

THE period of quiescence on the Western Front lasted nearly five months. It was explained partly by the exhaustion of the two sides, but mainly by the change which had come over the general situation in the last months of the year. The victory in Italy and the negotiations for an armistice with revolutionary Russia, which began on December 1, set free substantial reserves for the Western Front. For the first time since 1914 German armies of equal strength with the enemy could be concentrated there. The rôles of attacker and defender were reversed. Main Headquarters decided to take the offensive. In spite of superficial tranquillity, a period of the most intense preparation began.

The German plan of campaign, which led to the great battle of March, 1918, came into being but gradually. My Army Group took an active part in the necessary decisions and preparations.

If the war could not be ended otherwise than by a military decision, and the statesmen could find no diplomatic method of leading the parties to the negotiation table, there was nothing for it but to take the offensive. It was not, of course, to be expected that we could thereby force a peace which meant the dictation of our own terms. But great military victories would justify us in hoping that the peoples of the Quadruple Entente would be anxious to make peace and bring their governments into the path of negotiation. Further, the condition of the troops after more than three years of war imperiously demanded the offensive. We could not impose another year of defensive battles upon them without serious qualms. Release from the leaden pressure of nerve-shattering

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trench warfare was the ardent desire of the whole army in the West. Our capital—the systematic training for the offensive in peace and our high standard of generalship—which had lain idle for years, could only make its weight felt again if we attacked. In my view those critics misunderstand the psychology of our army who only look at the fact that we have lost the war, and now condemn the decision to take the offensive out of hand, and think that we should have confined ourselves to the defensive in the West. The choice of the defensive would have been nothing less than unnatural and certainly disastrous.

On the other hand, all who had faced our admirable opponents on the Western Front since the beginning of the campaign were in no danger of underestimating the difficulties of the offensive. The offensives of our enemies, which had one and all failed, were no standard by which to calculate our own prospects, but rather a warning. Conditions in the East were not to be compared. France had at her disposal a highly-developed railway and road system, and the English and French had good troops with a strong and mobile artillery, and superior motor transport for rapid troop movements on a large scale. And even if our break-through succeeded, our attack would be faced with fresh and difficult problems.

Even if we could confidently anticipate a great tactical success, our strategic success remained uncertain. We could only conjecture how far it could be developed into something which would decide the campaign. If the attack did not succeed or came to a standstill, after initial successes, it must be broken off. Otherwise a long-drawn-out battle, which was the same thing as a defensive battle so far as wastage was concerned, would be inevitable. In that case, to avoid losses we should have to contemplate retiring to the line from which we started. But if we made another attack as soon as possible at a different point, we should keep the initiative and stick to the idea of the offensive itself.

Main Headquarters first ordered the preparation of plans for attacks on the whole Western Front. At the first conference with General Ludendorff, in November, 1917, my Chief of Staff, Count Schulenburg, had put forward the view that the first great blow should be against the French, and had proposed to attack through and east of the Argonne, com-

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binning this with a vigorous thrust westwards from the St. Mihiel region, with the object of destroying that part of the enemy's forces in and around Verdun.

General Ludendorff, however, favoured an onslaught on the English from the start. At the end of January he decided finally on an attack against them. In addition to the military consideration that a victory over the English seemed less difficult of accomplishment than one over the French, this choice was strengthened by the political consideration of making England inclined for peace. Schulenburg and I thought that this political object was more likely to be obtained if the strength of the French were previously broken by a heavy defeat. The offensive against the English was to be conducted in such a way that their southern wing at St. Quentin would be forced in, and then their whole front shaken by an advance in a north-westerly direction. It was possible that the French would then rush to the direct assistance of their ally in peril and send their reserves to the battle-field. The attack was therefore to be mounted with our left wing so far south that the French and English would find themselves threatened with the separation of their armies on the battle-field. A large number of feints at other points far away from our chosen sector had to tie down the enemy's strategic reserves, and keep them away as long as possible from the scene of the decision.

Further, the attack was to be begun as soon as possible, with a view to anticipating enemy offensives, which might lead to defensive battles and the intervention of strong American forces. The middle of March was roughly decided upon as the time to begin. Any and every means of concealing our gigantic preparations were to be adopted, though we could not assume that the direction of our attack would continue to be hidden from the enemy. All the more important was it that he should be kept uncertain as to its time and extent, and the manner in which it was to be carried out.

Our preparations for the coming offensive must not divert our attention from the demands of defence. However improbable a French preventive offensive in winter might be, as the time for the German offensive approached, it was necessary to keep our defensive arrangements adaptable, and develop them accordingly. For the French aid to the English,

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when the latter were attacked, might subsequently take the form of a relief offensive at some point selected by themselves.

As early as November 28, 1917, a comprehensive instruction-book had been issued to the armies, dealing with the importance of the Advanced and Battle Zones, the various methods of defence in these zones in quiet periods of trench warfare as in a great battle. Defence against surprise tank attacks, such as we had seen at Cambrai, also demanded fresh tactical and technical preparations. Such attacks might occur at any time before the necessary distribution in depth had been organized on the hitherto quiet front. Lastly, the endeavour to make the last man available for the coming offensive made it necessary to prepare the front-shortening movements which were being worked out and the Gudrun retirement. Local cessions of ground on this front were to be anticipated even after the commencement of the German offensive. To be able to withdraw non-attacked fronts when faced with French relief attacks might be of vital importance for the prompt reinforcement of the armies engaged in the offensive. This "evasion" plan would also make it possible for us to attack the enemy by surprise as he followed up and take him in the flank.

Thus, in the programme of work for the winter, defence, too, had a large place. The programme was further enlarged by the preparations for the proposed feint attacks. In accordance with a careful and detailed plan, these attacks were to be carried out on the fronts of the 1st, 3rd and 5th Armies in combination with the onslaught on the English. Moreover, the armies which were not at first engaged in the offensive were to work out plans for other attacks on the assumption that the offensive against the English did not lead to a strategically satisfactory result. An increase of the staffs, the careful organization of their work and a well considered distribution of the available labour force were necessary. Although this labour force had gradually come to number nearly two hundred thousand men, it was small in comparison with the work it had to get through in a very short time. Trench construction and the tactical preparations for "evading" movements and retirements had, therefore, to be stopped for the moment. Thanks to prompt measures, the necessary order could be



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issued about the end of the year. The supervision and maintenance of the rear lines of defence were handed over to special corps.

### PREPARATIONS FOR THE OFFENSIVE IN THE WINTER OF 1917-1918

The vital matter was special training for the attack, and it was coupled with the most far-reaching attention to the welfare of the troops and the allowance of plenty of rest.

It was not merely a question of putting to good use the lessons learned in attacks in both the Western and Eastern theatres, but primarily of discovering new methods. With that end in view, exercises, experimental and instructional shooting practice were ordered for all training schools and artillery schools and ranges. Firing based purely on calculations and without registration (which always betrayed the intention to attack)—an invention of Captain Pulkowsky—the concentration and strict control of huge masses of artillery and trench-mortars in special groups, according to the object desired, the barrage, the co-operation of the infantry with the latter as well as with the escort batteries assigned to them, the speedy intervention of mobile artillery reserves and methods of crossing the shell-crater zone as quickly as possible—all this was made the object of arduous experiments and much practice.

As in everything else, the foundation of all this was the careful training of the individual man. To that end companies, battalions and regiments were trained in the co-operation of infantry with machine-guns, trench-mortars, escort batteries, aircraft and tanks, the use of searchlight and visual signals, the employment of gas and smoke shell, etc. Finally, individual exercises were to be carried out by whole divisions. Schemes of instructions were prepared, worked out to the last detail. Each army had to organize a special Instructional Centre behind the front, and to these were sent the twenty-one divisions from the East, which joined the Army Groups between November and March. They could thus be prepared for warfare in the West.

The basis of the training for regimental officers was mainly the handbook, "The Attack in Trench Warfare," which was issued by Main Headquarters. To attain a speedy and whole-

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sale success, to overrun the enemy's trench system so rapidly and penetrate it so deeply that the enemy's reserves could not arrive in time, even if they arrived at all, and finally to resume the thrust behind the broken front, vital importance was attached to the factor of surprise.

The schools and courses responsible for the instruction of officers, particularly the Regimental Officers' Course and General Staff Course at Sedan, under the careful direction of Majors Kewisch and von Schütz, had to change their courses of instruction to instruction in the attack. War games, lectures and exercises in the technique of leadership with officers in high commands promoted the training of the General Staff Officers with troops. In every army a reserve of officers up to regimental commanders was created to cover the anticipated wastage. Personal supervision of all training areas by the Staffs of the Army Groups and Armies guaranteed uniform methods of instruction.

After this new training system came the reorganization ordered by Main Headquarters of the divisions earmarked for the attack. Our prospective military task demanded changes and, to a certain extent, fresh developments in their distribution in the Order of Battle. The reorganization of these assault divisions was partly at the expense of the trench divisions. Only the necessities of an army cut off from all the resources of the outside world, after three and a half years of war, could justify a measure so pregnant with consequences for the future.

If the tremendous burden of work in every department during this winter was successfully got through, it was primarily due to the vitalizing effect of the very idea of the offensive. It seemed to double the energies, output and devotion of everyone, even those who at first were denied the good fortune of participating in the attack. When I look back at the innumerable exercises I witnessed behind the front of my Army Group during that winter, I remember countless scenes which spoke of grim hard work on the part of all concerned. All those who understand the psychology of our Army, which even then was virtually a militia only, was justified in hoping that the weapon we were forging would be fully capable of dealing some very shrewd blows.

The reports of the enemy we received made it increasingly

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clear that he was expecting our attack, and was making all preparations to meet it. His reserves, which were gradually being joined by a few American divisions, were distributed along the whole front. His artillery was distributed in depth. Rear lines of defence, especially on the fronts of the 1st and 3rd Armies, extended far into the back areas. A large number of raids, both on land and in the air, tried to obtain information about our intentions and the distribution of our troops. Air squadrons reconnoitred far behind our lines and, by bombing attacks on railway junctions, suspected depots and camps, tried to harass our concentration. We made it difficult for the enemy to discover our real intentions by arranging that all our preparations which by nature could not be concealed—such as the extension of our railway system, flying grounds, hutments, and so on—should be distributed as equally as possible over the whole front.

For the coming offensive His Majesty had ordered a new Order of Battle on the Western Front. On January 31 my dear old 5th Army left my Army Group.

From the unforgettable days of 1914, in which I had taken the field at the head of this army, to the end of the year 1916, I had been with it through the hard school of three strenuous war years, and together we had shared the victories of the advance and the heavy times of the fighting at Verdun. Good and bad days, joy and sorrow, countless memories and experiences had forged a link between the 5th Army and myself which the fires of battle had only hardened, and which even to-day keeps me with it in spirit. As Commander of an Army Group I had then for over a year had the joy of knowing that the 5th Army was the corner-stone of the battle front under my orders. That it should now leave the force under my command was a direct personal sorrow. I gave expression to my feelings in a warm message of farewell to the 5th Army.

Henceforward it formed with Army Detachment C a separate Army Group under the command of General von Gallwitz, one of our very best military heads, who had proved his worth in all theatres of war. His strong personality and his outstanding qualities both as man and statesman made a lasting impression upon me. The newly-formed 18th Army, which had taken over the sector between the 2nd and 7th Armies on both sides of St. Quentin, came under my command on

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February 1st. My Army Group thus formed the left wing of the attack. The reason for this reorganization of the commands was the intention of Main Headquarters to take the direction of the operations into its own hands.

The Commander of the 18th Army was General von Hutier, a striking, self-reliant personality, who had particularly distinguished himself at the capture of Riga. His Chief of Staff was the temperamental Major-General von Sauberzweig, a man with whom the offensive spirit was second nature.

I will not pretend to deny that I was absolutely delighted that I was to participate in the great decision with at any rate one of the armies under my command. Though I and my Chief of Staff thought exactly alike, and had no illusions whatever about the difficulties of the strategic problem it had to solve, we had perfect confidence in the spirit that animated the army even after three and a half years of the tribulations of the war, and we never doubted that our operation would end successfully always provided that we averted the danger of months of "material" and attrition battles.

### THE STRATEGIC PLAN OF THE SPRING OFFENSIVE IN 1918

The centre of gravity of the offensive we had planned was to be found in the Crown Prince Rupprecht's Army Group, which, with its 17th and 2nd Armies, was to cut through the English front and roll it up to the north.

The task of the 18th Army was to debouch from both sides of St. Quentin, from Pontruet to the bend of the Oise at Hamégicourt, and without stopping reach its first objective, the Somme and the Crozat Canal between the mouth of the Omignon and the Oise. Three strong trench systems with fortified strong points were to be carried in the process. The scheme of the whole operation meant that it was of special importance that the attack between the little river Omignon and the Somme should sweep forward to its objective without a halt. If we succeeded in this we could send strong reserves in a north-westerly direction to clear a path for the 2nd Army of General von der Marwitz through the particularly difficult country over which it had to attack. The attack would thus develop into a break-through. The attack south of the Somme had a still more limited objective, the Crozat Canal. It was at first



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regarded as merely covering the flank of the main operation. The weight of the attack of the 18th Army must therefore be laid on its right wing. For this reason, and because the attack sectors north of the Somme were more than twice as long, the northern wing must be strengthened at the expense of the southern: to make that possible strong flank support was necessary in the shape of artillery fire from the south-eastern bank of the Oise.

Main Headquarters had assigned the 18th Army, unlike the 17th and 2nd, the comparatively modest task of reaching the Somme and the Crozat Canal. My Chief of Staff and I anticipated a French *riposte* at a very early stage, a *riposte* which might well take the form of an attack in a north-easterly direction, perhaps over the line Roye-Noyon. In view of such an eventuality we proposed to Main Headquarters to allow us also to secure the bridgeheads over the Canal at Jussy and Tergnier, so that from those vantage points we could take our adversary in flank. General von Hutier extended this idea in a suggestion to the Army Group that the 18th Army must simultaneously seize the chance of thrusting across the Somme in order to attack the French in the open and thereby prevent them from giving direct assistance to the English north of the Somme. On his own initiative he made the necessary preparations for this movement. We agreed with him and passed on the proposal to Main Headquarters, but the latter declined to express any definite opinion on the matter for the time being. The course of events was to reveal the soundness of the proposal.

In addition to the main attack from the line Pontruet-Hamégicourt a local attack from La Fère was also contemplated. The English front had extended to that point since the beginning of February. La Fère was the only possible crossing over the sector of the Oise south of Hamégicourt which had been dammed at the time of the Siegfried movement. This local attack was a difficult one because it had to be started from the small nucleus of the little fortress, and the obstacle of the canal running alongside the Oise had to be surmounted also. Yet a thrust in a westerly direction from La Fère, by opening the Crozat canal, might be of far-reaching importance to the development of the main attack of the 18th Army.

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Lastly a diversion south of La Fère on the western front of the 7th Army was considered on the assumption that at a later stage the necessary forces might be available. It would not only extend the front of attack, but by tying down enemy reserves might facilitate the progress of the attack north of the Oise.

The concentration of the divisions and the necessary material had begun behind the front of the 18th Army at the



SKETCH 8.—The Great Battle in France from March 21 to April 4, 1918.

				REFERENCE.			
—————	Original line			+ + + + +	Line reached March 26		
.....	Line reached March 21			o o o o o o o	" " " 27		
+ + + + +	" " " 22			x x x x x	" " " 28		
- - - - -	" " " 23			.....	" " " 29		
+ - + - +	" " " 24			- - + - -	" " " 30		
.....	" " " 25				" " April 4		

beginning of February. The troops were brought up both by foot and by rail. All marching was done at night. At first the divisions were distributed in hutments in the rear Operations and L. of C. zone of the 18th Army. The forward concentration was only to be effected in the last few nights preceding the attack. Astounding feats were performed by the railways. Nearly 1,350 trains arrived in the period from February to the middle of March. The number was simply

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an indication of the enormous amount of material we had to accumulate. Taking gun ammunition for example, about 3 million rounds were sent for the 18th Army alone.

On March 6 there was a final conference with Main Headquarters at Mons. It was the last of the many conferences since November, 1917, in which the spring offensive was discussed. The plan of the attack was decided upon. On a day yet to be fixed the 17th, 2nd and 18th Armies were to start the attack simultaneously on the 80 kilometre front between Arras-La Fère, after a sudden and annihilating three hours' bombardment by a huge concentration of artillery.

On March 10 His Majesty fixed the commencement of the attack for the 21st. Main Headquarters settled in Avesnes for the battle. The headquarters of my Army Group remained in Charleville.

On the 19th March the feint attacks began according to programme on the fronts not concerned in the offensive. Those on the fronts of the 1st and 3rd Armies were of particular importance. They fulfilled their purpose entirely. The French expected the attack to come in Champagne. Even as late as March 24 General Pétain refused to send direct assistance to Marshal Haig, on the ground that the German main attack in Rheims region was imminent.

### THE FIRST VICTORIES OF THE SPRING OFFENSIVE

At 6.30 a.m. in the morning of March 21 the bombardment began, after the enemy's artillery had been systematically gassed for three hours. More than 2,600 guns of the 18th and 7th Armies participated. Observation and aerial activity was out of the question owing to a heavy mist, but on the other hand it favoured the assembly and first advance of the assault troops.

Twenty-four assault divisions of the 18th Army, organized in three waves, were concentrated under the command of Generals Freiherr von Lüttwitz (3rd Corps), von Oetinger (9th Corps), von Webern (17th Corps) and von Conta (4th Reserve Corps). At 9.40 a.m. the infantry attacks began simultaneously on the front of the 17th, 2nd and 18th Armies. The eleven divisions of the first wave of the 18th Army stormed forward from the line Bellenglise-Hamécourt, close behind

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the barrage. As early as 6.15 a.m. the attack from La Fère across the Oise of three Jäger battalions supported by units of the 47th R.D. had set a highly successful example.

The enemy's first position was quickly captured at all points. There was hard fighting for the intermediate position, but in the afternoon this, too, had fallen and the second position had been broken through in many places.

The 3rd Corps had stormed Maissémy with General von Bergmann's 113th Division and was engaged with the 88th and 28th Divisions in fighting for Holnon Wood and the area south of it. On the left of the 3rd Corps the 9th Corps was pressing forward strongly, with the 50th Division, the 45th R.D. and the 5th Guard I.D. on both sides of the St. Quentin-Ham road, while the 17th Corps with the 238th, 36th and 1st Bavarian Divisions was tearing a gap in the enemy's second position in the region of Castres and Essigny-le-Grand. On the left wing the 4th R.C. was thrusting west with the 34th and 37th Divisions across the St. Quentin-La Fère road and attacked Fort Vendeuil with the 103rd Division. Further south two trench divisions, the 13th Landwehr and 47th Reserve, participated victoriously in the general advance across the Oise.

By the evening the infantry of the divisions of the first wave, closely followed by their escort batteries, had penetrated to an average depth of 6 kilometres into the enemy's defensive system. The trenches and shell-hole area of the advance zone lay behind it. The divisions of the second wave had gone forward to the departure position or, like the 5th Guard I.D., for example, had already taken part in the action. A large labour force was industriously engaged in repairing roads and railways so that supplies could be sent up to the divisions.

The way to an extension of the break-through had been opened. The English had suffered terribly heavy losses, both in men and in prisoners, guns and war material. The vital thing was to give the sorely shaken enemy no time to recover.

With ruthless energy the 18th Army's attack was continued during the night of March 21-22 and on the following day along the whole line. The impetus and enthusiasm of the troops was such that they did not need the Army Order I issued in the evening of March 21 enjoining them to keep up



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the pursuit without respite. In the sector between the little Omignon and the Somme the enemy was still putting up an obstinate resistance in his third position. General von Beczwarzowsky and Prince von Buchau's divisions were still fighting hard for Holnon Wood and the trench system forming its southern annex. The divisions of the 9th A.C. under Generals von Engelbrechten, von Weise and von Harthausen were fighting their way forward. The 17th A.C. and the 4th R.C. had an easier task. The divisions commanded by Below, Leipzig, Dänner, Teetzmann, Eberhardt all reached the Crozat Canal and secured the crossings. Fort Vendeuil was stormed by some of General Lepper's men. To facilitate the advance of the two northern corps portions of General von Below's 238th Division and General Weber's 9th Division wheeled north and took in flank and rear the enemy still holding his ground north of the Somme. Under this concentric pressure his resistance collapsed at this point also. In the night of March 22 the so-called Haig Position was overrun.

I shall never forget the scenes I witnessed during these days. For the first time after more than two years of weary defence in the waste of trenches in the Western theatre of war the hour of liberation had struck and the command had gone forth to Germany's sons to strike for final victory in the open field. As if shaking off some horrible nightmare my infantry had risen from its trenches and crushing all resistance with unexampled vigour had broken through the enemy's defensive system. Once more the unsurpassable peace training, the psychic and moral superiority of officers and men, our soldierly discipline and German spirit, the model preparations and the work of our leaders had proved themselves on the field of battle. The morning of March 22 the unforgettable took me into the heap of ruins that had once been St. Quentin. This once flourishing and remarkable town, in the very forefront of our battle line for more than a year, had been converted by hostile shells into what was practically a dead heap of stones; it was now half submerged in waves of interminable columns and marching troops. All round me cheerful faces, cheers and shouts at my car, which had great difficulty in threading its way forward, an irresistible onward march, the beating pulse of a victorious army which knows no other law but "Forwards, on the heels of the enemy!"

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Among us marched long columns of captured Englishmen, worn out and with the marks of battle upon them, but also with the proud and self-reliant bearing peculiar to that nation. Through a heap of ruins I made my way to the battered cellars of the former Lyceum, in which General von Hulsén, the splendid Commander of the brave 231st Division, had his headquarters. I found a group of officers feverishly at work, writing as fast as they could, the telephone to their ears and on their faces an expression of tired but composed satisfaction under the customary mask of quiet responsibility. I could shake hands with many a comrade and companion in arms. Then we proceeded further to the battlefield. In sorrowful contemplation we gazed on the dead, and with grateful emotion on the wounded, to whom we were fortunately in a position to render some little service of love. Captured trenches, guns and countless quantities of war material stretched as far as the eye could reach. In front of me was the fire and flame of the battle, advancing slowly but steadily. And over all the horror of the scene and its alternating impressions was the shining spring sun which after long months of doubt filled me with fresh confidence and longing hopes for the future.

Our ruthless pursuit—for that is what we were now engaged in as the enemy's reserves had not yet reached the battlefield—brought the right wing of the 3rd A.C. to the Somme as early as midday on March 23. The enemy opposed a desperate resistance at the crossings, but it was broken at all points. The brave Baden Leibgrenadier Regiment of the 28th Division, which had forced a crossing after a hard struggle at Bethincourt, had to defend itself on the opposite bank against fierce counter-attacks by the enemy, who poured out on all sides. There was violent fighting for Ham before it fell into our hands. The two corps on our southern wing had already left the Crozat Canal far behind them, and drove the French divisions, which were at once thrown into the fight to support the English, towards Paaren.

On the evening of this day of brilliant successes I addressed the following Order of the Day to the victorious Commander of the 18th Army, General von Hutier :

“In a bold, swift rush the 18th Army has broken through the enemy's lines, and in ruthless pursuit has crushed all

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resistance and driven the English over the Somme and the Crozat Canal. Ahead of all the other armies the 18th Army has reached its first objective in wide sectors and closed resolutely with very large forces. Thanks to the superior and determined leading of your Excellency, the loyal co-operation of your advisers and officers, and above all the unexampled self-sacrifice of my brave troops, successes have been won of which the Western front has not seen the like since the first days of the war. To express my thanks to the brave leader of the 18th Army, his triumphant battalions, squadrons and batteries, and all who have contributed to the victory is a happy necessity for me. We have hard tasks still before us. With the 18th Army I confidently look forward to the battles to come. I request your Excellency to communicate my gratitude to the troops, and would be glad if you would also bring them to the notice of the wounded."

### CONTINUATION OF THE ATTACK ON MARCH 24 AND 25

By the third day of the battle the 18th Army had already reached its objective, the Somme. In accordance with the original plan of operations, which assigned the main burden of the attack to the southern wing of Prince Rupprecht's Army Group (the 17th and 2nd Armies), my task in the offensive had really been fulfilled.

The 18th Army had now to stand on the defensive on the strong obstacle of the Somme and extend its right wing to Peronne. I have already said, however, that with my approval General von Hutier had already anticipated and made careful preparations for the continuation of his attack beyond the objective we had reached.

We now reaped the advantage of all this, for as early as the morning of March 23 Main Headquarters issued an order that the 18th Army should continue its advance in echelon in the direction Chaulnes-Noyon and send forward a strong force through Ham. The reason for this momentous change in the plan of the operations was that the success of the 17th Army and the northern wing of the 2nd Army had been neither so rapid nor so complete as had been anticipated. If the 18th Army now stopped, as had originally been arranged, there was a danger that the whole operation might come to a stand-

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still. Only by a ruthless pursuit at the point where we had won an unexpectedly speedy and brilliant victory, i.e., on the southern wing of the 2nd Army and the front of the 18th Army, could the whole operation be kept fluid and the breakthrough for which we were striving be realized. General Ludendorff therefore adopted as a fresh strategic aim the idea of separating the English and French by a rapid advance on both banks of the Somme. "South of the Somme," ran the order issued to us, "the attack is to be pressed against the French by wheeling into the line Amiens-Montdidier-Noyon and advancing in a south-westerly direction. For this purpose the 2nd Army has to press forward on both sides of the Somme with Amiens as its main objective and keeping in the closest touch with the 18th Army. If all goes well with this operation the left wing of the 18th Army will have the task of attacking southwards across the Oise, from between Noyon and Chauny, so as to combine with the 7th Army in throwing the French over the Aisne." The reinforcement of the 18th Army this change involved had already begun: the 7th Army sent us six divisions in succession, the 211th, 223rd, 3rd Bavarian, 6th Bavarian, 6th Reserve and 6th Bavarian Reserve. Three more, the 51st Reserve, 52nd and 242nd, were sent to us by Main Headquarters.

The course of events in the next few days justified the hope that we should succeed in reaching our new and ambitious goal. On March 24 the enemy's resistance on the Somme was completely broken, though on that day the right wing of the 18th Army, held up by the difficulty of crossing in the enemy's fire, was not able to gain much ground on the far bank. The southern wing, on the other hand, swept westwards, past Chauny, along the Oise. About 20,000 men, 400 guns and 2,000 machine-guns had been our booty up to this point. Our indefatigable aerial reconnaissance brought in the important news that all the roads and railways leading to the battlefield were alive with marching columns and railway traffic.

Meanwhile we still had the initiative and made good use of it on March 25 to spoil our foe's pretty game. Well ahead of all other divisions the 28th I.D.—now incorporated in the 25th R.C., which under the energetic General von Winkler had been put in between the 3rd A.C. and the 9th A.C.—



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snatched Etalon from the enemy and continued its vigorous advance through Hattencourt. At the south of Nesle there was fierce fighting before the French were thrown back. The 36th Division of the 17th A.C. pressed forward to Fretoy. The 4th R.C. was approaching Noyon.

In these favourable circumstances my Group Headquarters considered the question of sending the right wing of the 7th Army forward to the Ailette, and also proposed to Main Headquarters that the left wing of the 18th Army should not at first pass beyond the line Roye-Noyon, but that the main weight of our attack should be laid on the right wing in the direction of Amiens, so that in conjunction with the 2nd Army the old-German-French positions in the line Caix-Arvre Valley west of Roye should be reached. My Chief of Staff and I were of opinion, and remained so during the next few days, that our principal business was to bring about the complete and final separation of the French and English armies by continuing our westerly advance and then, but not till then, pressing on with our operation to the south-west and south. At the moment General Ludendorff expressed his general agreement with that view.

### MARCH 26 TO 30

March 26 brought us even larger gains of ground than the preceding days. The old German-French lines were reached and passed. In the centre of the front the 231st and 9th Divisions stormed Roye in the morning. Noyon too fell into the hands of the 4th R.C. after sanguinary house-to-house fighting. General von der Marwitz's army could not keep pace on its left wing. The enemy threw his troops into action overhastily, and in small bodies as they arrived. They wore themselves away in brave but isolated attacks. By the evening of March 26 ten English and eight French divisions had been thrown in on the front of the 18th Army. Prisoners told us that they had been brought by motor transport from Paschendale in Flanders, a fourteen hour journey. Our aircraft reported more and more troop trains and transport on the roads and railways leading to Compiègne. It was clear that we should very soon meet with strong resistance from large masses. Day and night our bombing squadrons attacked

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the enemy's most important railway centres. Our Wilhelm guns hurled their shells into Paris, more than a hundred kilometres away.

With iron resolution General Ludendorff held fast to the aim he had in view. On the evening of March 26th he ordered that the separation of our two opponents, the English and the French, should be brought about by a left wheel against the French, and to that end the Somme at and below Amiens and the lower Avre were to be reached. When this plan had been realized, he intended that the offensive should be continued in a south-westerly direction, in which movement the 18th Army was to reach the line Tartigny-Compiègne. At first the army was to secure the crossings of the lower Avre only, and await the wheel of the 2nd Army on the outer circumference through Amiens; behind its left wing it was to form in echelon for the subsequent advance across the Oise in the direction Compiègne-Fontenoy. The 18th Army had sent thirty divisions into action up to this point. Main Headquarters sent it four more—the 14th, 80th Reserve, 76th Reserve and the German Jäger Division.

I am indulging in no after-the-event criticism of General Ludendorff's generalship if I describe the impression which his bold and ambitious plan made upon my Chief of Staff and myself. We entirely agreed with his basic idea, that the centre of gravity of the operation should at first be in the direction of Amiens. But it seemed to us that the left wing of the 2nd Army to which this task fell was not strong enough. We were of opinion that fresh reserves should be sent to that wing in order to speed up its advance, and we therefore did not agree with the intention of Main Headquarters to combine the advance on Amiens with another attack—involving the dissipation of our forces—on a different part of the front, *i.e.*, the northern wing of the 17th Army facing Arras. We were not in a position to judge of the reasons for that attack, which took place on March 28 and failed, as is well known; but we regretted that the whole striking force still available to us in our reserves was not employed in one great blow to reach our sole objective—in this case Amiens.

The left wheel towards the lower Avre which had been assigned to us as our task was not carried out as intended. On March 27 neither the right wing of the 18th Army nor the

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left wing of the 2nd Army was able to make much headway in the roadless shell-hole area, which was alive with machine-gun nests. On the other hand, the divisions of the 9th and 17th Corps in the centre were able to overcome local but obstinate enemy resistance, and carry out its swerve into the line Montdidier-Lassigny. The 4th R.C., on the left wing, also gained a front facing due south in the valley of the Oise. In the next few days the troops between Noyon and La Fère were put under the command of General von Scholer, the G.O.C. 8th A.C., of whom I had a particularly high opinion on account of the ideal imperturbability he showed in his work. They thus joined the 7th Army, so that the attack we were planning across the Oise to the Ailette should be under a single command.

As provided in the plan of operations, the centre and left wing of the 18th Army had performed its immediate task—the left wheel—by March 27. Everything now depended upon the ability of the right wing also to get forward to the lower Avre. However, the divisions of the 3rd A.C. and 25th R.C. had met with a strong resistance, which began to reveal the changing character of the battle. Instead of the previous pursuit with its speedy crushing of all opposition, it was now becoming necessary carefully to prepare our attacks on the enemy's stubbornly and skilfully defended positions. Once more the function of the heavy artillery resumed its previous importance. But owing to the great difficulties of supply, it was already running short of the necessary ammunition. On March 29, except on the extreme right wing, where some further ground was gained, there was every appearance that we should have to defend ourselves against heavy enemy counter-attacks.

My Army Group staff had already informed Main Headquarters, in the evening of March 28, that it was our view that before the operation against the French was continued the attack on Amiens must be completed, that important centre of communications eliminated and the English thoroughly beaten. If the 2nd Army now came to a standstill both strategic goals could not be reached simultaneously. This view was approved. But March 29 had not brought us much nearer Amiens. There was a danger that if we waited long on the Montdidier-Noyon front the French would have time to strengthen their defences,

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while an immediate attack along the whole front might still give us a chance of preventing the enemy from employing his reserves systematically. That view particularly appealed to the Headquarters Staff of the 18th Army. Main Headquarters decided in favour of it, and for March 30 ordered the resumption of the offensive on the whole front of the 18th Army, the main pressure to be exerted as before on the right wing and the southern wing of the 2nd Army. In this general attack my Chief of Staff saw merely an attempt to set in motion again an operation which had all but come to a standstill. If it did not succeed, we were in favour of breaking off the offensive on this front and resuming it further east on the front of the 7th Army.

The course of the battle of March 30 showed that it was too late to continue the offensive movement against the line Amiens-Compiègne. For the first time the enemy brought up a large force of artillery, while the 18th Army had to be content with a very short artillery preparation, partly owing to shortage of ammunition. On the left wing, particularly in the region of Lassigny, there was fluctuating fighting, which ultimately ended without result for us. Our progress east, south and west of Montdidier was only slight. The divisions of the 3rd A.C. alone were successful in forcing the crossing of the Avre at Braches. The 1st Guard Division of my brother Eitel Friedrich stormed Aubvillers, Osson and Grivesnes. The left wing of the 2nd Army secured the crossing at Moreuil. Decisive successes in the direction of Amiens were not obtainable, however, and General Ludendorff therefore decided to abandon the idea of continuing the offensive towards the south, and also the intended thrust of the 7th Army across the Oise between Noyon and Chauny. Only in the projecting corner between Chauny and Brancourt was the enemy to be driven out and forced behind the Ailette.

### THE SPRING OFFENSIVE IS BROKEN OFF. THE ATTACK OF THE 7TH ARMY TOWARD THE AILETTE AT THE BEGINNING OF APRIL

With this decision the offensive as a whole was broken off, as Main Headquarters, in the interests of the German operations, rightly refused to entertain the idea of a material and attrition battle such as would have become inevitable if



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the attack had been persisted in. One last partial attack was to be made, with the object, if at all possible, of capturing Amiens, which was of high strategic importance as the most vital railway nexus for the communications between the English and French armies. The object in view certainly justified one last supreme effort. As the energies of the troops were exhausted after ten days of colossal exploits in fighting and marching, and the available artillery ammunition was inadequate, it was decided to pause for a few days and carry out the attack on April 4, after bringing up a number of divisions which had hitherto taken no part in the action, and a plentiful supply of shell. Of course, even these new divisions—the 2nd Guard, 2nd Bavarian, 204th, 14th, 53rd Reserve, 80th Reserve and the German Jäger Division—were not at their best after days of uninterrupted marching and continually bivouacking in the open, and it was impossible to do without the assistance of several divisions which were already greatly exhausted.

Amiens was to be reached by a simultaneous thrust of the inner wings of the 18th and 2nd Armies on both sides of the Avre, *i.e.*, from a general south-easterly direction. In addition to the 3rd A.C. was assigned the task of pushing forward to and across the Noye. Unfortunately our success did not come up to our hopes; it amounted to no more than a moderate extension of our bridgehead at Moreuil. Main Headquarters now definitely gave up the attempt to capture Amiens.

After a fortnight of open warfare the German front again relapsed into the rigidity of trench warfare. The strategic break-through which was to burst the enemy's armies asunder had not been achieved. Moreover, the final position in which the Germans found themselves in the huge westerly salient Arras-Montdidier-La Fère could not be regarded as favourable. The 18th Army and the left wing of the 2nd Army were in a difficult position, being exposed to the concentric fire of a reinforced foe. The energies of our troops were eaten away in the following weeks by incessant fighting to maintain the ground that had been won. Continual relief was therefore necessary. Several times the Army Group suggested to Main Headquarters the voluntary withdrawal of the 18th Army behind the Avre and the little river Dom, and more especially

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the abandonment of the bridgehead at Moreuil. The Headquarters Staff of the 18th Army opposed this proposal, and Main Headquarters rejected it, as they wished to make it appear that the resumption of the offensive on this front was at any time possible.

In spite of the strategically unsatisfactory outcome of the "Great Battle in France," great things had been accomplished, thanks to the heroic courage of the troops and resolute and skilful generalship. For a distance of more than sixty kilometres the 18th Army had overcome natural and artificial obstacles, and in a perfect desert of shell-holes broken down the resistance of the enemy which had become stronger every day. An enormous amount of booty in war material of all kinds and more than fifty thousand prisoners were the external symbol of the victory we had gained. The fighting efficiency of the English had suffered a severe blow. About forty English divisions, two-thirds of their whole army, had been beaten, and even the reserves of the French were grievously affected, as about twenty of their divisions had been drawn into the battle.\* Everything now depended upon overthrowing the tottering structure of English and French military power by further rapid blows on other fronts before the Americans, who were now arriving in the Western theatre in quick succession, could succeed in levelling matters up again.

Main Headquarters continued to retain the initiative. The moment the fronts of the 17th, 2nd and 18th Armies had settled down, the right wing of the 7th Army started to carry out the attack which had been prepared against the enemy's wedge across the Ailette. In three days of fighting between April 6th and 8th, the 223rd, 211th, 75th, 14th Reserve, 241st and 222nd Divisions, under the commanders of the 8th A.C. and 8th R.C., drove the enemy behind the river. Thus the front of the 18th Army was shortened and its communications improved. A strategic objective was now no longer assigned to this operation, which served only as a diversion for the benefit of the great offensive on the Lys front on both sides of Armentières, on which the 6th and 4th Armies embarked on April 9, an offensive which meant further pressure on the

\*According to Laure, *Au 3ième bureau du troisième G.Q.G.*, up to April 5 Pétain had sent 45 infantry divisions and 6 cavalry divisions to the area north of the Oise.

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exhausted English army, and compelled the French to send further strong reserves to Flanders. Even this operation, which reached its culminating point in the storming of Kemmel, did not attain complete strategic success, but it meant a further step on the road to the final military overthrow of our adversaries.

The great seriousness of their position had, however, spurred the Allies to amazing efforts. A single command of the Allied armies was created. Marshal Foch, a character related to Ludendorff in his iron strength of will, broke with the system of the careful separation of the French and English armies. The French took over the battle-front to the Somme. The fronts which were not touched by the battle were extensively weakened, and American and exhausted English divisions were sent to them. The English and French divisions still in Italy were brought back, accompanied by Italian reinforcements. Of momentous importance, though not perceptible for the moment, was the arrival of the American reinforcements, which was accelerated as the result of the English defeats.

Both the advanced front and the back areas of the 18th Army were exposed to hostile shell-fire, which increased in intensity every day. The immediate resumption of the offensive had gradually become impossible. Our supply arrangements must first be put on a sound foundation, such as to permit of a careful concentration for the attack as had been done in March. The necessary work could not be done in a few weeks. Nor was there any doubt that from now onwards the enemy's defence was in the highest state of preparedness at this his most sensitive spot.

### FURTHER PREPARATIONS FOR ATTACK IN APRIL AND MAY

A strategic rearrangement was necessary. The vital thing was to keep the initiative. Time was pressing, for we must soon expect that large American forces would make their presence felt. Main Headquarters fully realized that from the moment in which the initiative passed to the enemy the war could no longer be won. But even now they adhered to their view that it was primarily the English army which must be destroyed. To that end they planned the continuation of the operations in Flanders. Meanwhile, however, such strong reserves, particularly French reserves, had gathered in that

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quarter, that it seemed necessary first to weaken the enemy front in Flanders by a diversion at some other point.

The choice fell upon the French front opposite my Army Group, and in particular a sector held by weak and to a great extent exhausted troops. It was the Chemin des Dames, for which there had been such fierce fighting in the previous year. The element of surprise must still be carefully preserved, even against a foe whose wits had been sharpened by March 21.

It was therefore inevitable that the strained situation in which the 18th Army found itself as the result of the March offensive should remain with all its patent drawbacks. Only thus could the enemy's attention be kept fixed on this point. The fresh attack must be mounted as far from the present vortex as its combination with future strategic plans on the final front of the March battle permitted.

It was thus that the plan of a joint attack by the 7th and 1st Armies between Soissons and Rheims came into being. The hills around Laon were particularly favourable for veiling our preparations. The Chemin des Dames, a natural and artificial stronghold, must necessarily seem an unlikely front for our offensive to our enemies. My Chief of Staff and I were of opinion that the best course was to attack with strong wings, pushing the right wing of the 7th Army along the Oise, with a view to reaching the lower course of the Aisne, and if possible the Forest of Compiègne, and on the other wing capturing Rheims and the wooded hills south of it. This plan would have certainly necessitated a material addition to our resources in men and material, and Main Headquarters could not see its way to grant us what we asked in view of the main blow which was to be delivered in Flanders.

Thus the objective of the new attack was limited to the Aisne at Soissons and the Vesle. When this line was reached Main Headquarters hoped to have secured a basis for a further attack on the southern front of the 18th Army from Montdidier-Noyon in the direction of Compiègne. This second attack was to give the army's southern front that depth which in the long run would be indispensable for reasons of supply. From the reaching of the Aisne at Compiègne we could also expect that the hilly district between the Oise and the Aisne north of the Compiègne-Soissons sector would fall into our hands automatically. Thus we hoped we should



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get a front favourable for economic defence which would give us full freedom of movement in another direction. Even to-day I still think that it would have been better if this division of the operation into separate actions at different times and in different places had been dropped, and our plan of one attack with the main pressure on both wings adopted. If we reached along the Oise to Compiègne in our first thrust, in all probability the wedge-like position of the enemy opposite the southern fronts of the 18th Army would have been so imperilled that the straightening-out of the line from Montdidier to Compiègne, involving an immense improvement in the situation of the 18th Army, would have followed automatically. On the other wing of the attack the capture of Rheims and the hilly region south of it would best be attained by enveloping the city not only from the north but also from the east. I am inclined to think that the necessary reserves, even in heavy artillery, could have been placed at our disposal if Main Headquarters had made up its mind to place at the disposal of the 7th Army some few of the many divisions and artillery formations concentrated behind Rupprecht's Army Group.

The first orders from Main Headquarters for the preparations for the attack of the 7th and the right wing of the 1st Army were issued as early as April 17. We set to work without a moment's delay. Fresh Corps Commands were made available, and the assault divisions of both armies were brought up to the back areas for the purpose of recuperation, training and rest.

Unfortunately more than a month had to elapse before we were ready. During that time the position of the 18th Army remained difficult. The enemy kept up a heavy fire. There were a whole series of raids. Compared with our original front on March 21 our new front was almost three times as long. A proper trench system was not in existence, and the incessant artillery fire prevented us from constructing one. Supply could only get forward slowly. In the newly-won area there was no chance of billeting and resting divisions out of line. As the troops were perpetually engaged in fighting of some kind the construction of defences on the army front made little headway. Most of our available labour battalions were, moreover, already employed on preparations for the subsequent

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attack on the Montdidier-Noyon line. Thus the wastage of the 18th Army remained high.

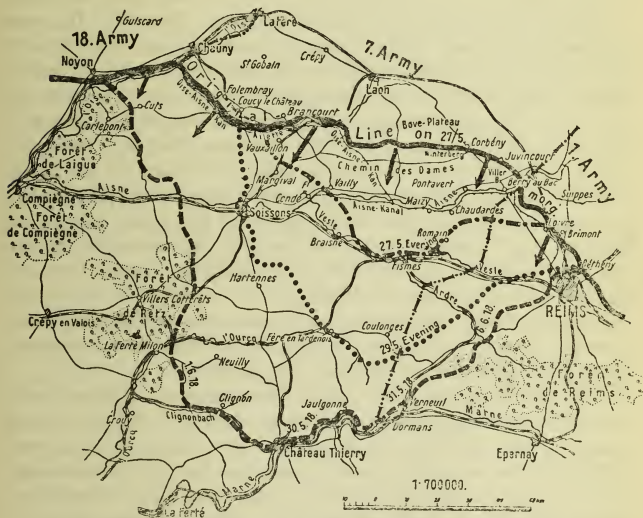
The final plan for the new offensive was as follows: The objective of the attack was the line Soissons-Rheims. Strong resistance must be expected in the direction of Soissons. The 7th Army must therefore press forward to the heights south of the Vesle, in order to tie hostile forces down and facilitate the advance on Soissons. The 1st Army, after gaining the line of the Aisne-Marne Canal, between Berry-au-Bac and Loivre, must join in the advance to the Vesle with its right wing. The day fixed for the attack was May 27. In conjunction with this offensive the 18th Army, as soon as the concentration of the necessary heavy artillery permitted, was to attack with its left wing (38th R.C.) across the Oise, east of Noyon, to the confluence of the Ailette, and with the right wing (7th A.C.) of the 7th Army over the Ailette. The purpose of this second thrust was to take the weight of the main attack of the right wing off the 7th Army and extend its success. We hoped that the successful sweep of the main attack to Soissons would enable us to venture on the operation across the Oise and the Ailette with a comparative small force of infantry. The scheme of attack for the southern front of the 18th Army, west of Noyon to Montdidier, was to be adaptable to circumstances. The time fixed for this later attack depended upon the progress of the 7th and 1st Armies.

For the 18th Army the preparations were on a larger scale than those for the battle in March. About 1,800 troop and supply trains arrived by May 25. The strong Chemin des Dames line seemed to indicate the advisability of concentrating an even greater force of artillery. The time for artillery preparation could therefore be shorter. The steep ascent up to the Chemin des Dames and the necessity of crossing the wide shell-hole area on the ridge demanded the preparation of special march material and highly detailed arrangements for the moving up of artillery and all transport. Great preparation was also necessary to secure supply on the narrow roads on the Chemin des Dames which had been destroyed for miles. We had no railways leading into the enemy's area in consequence of the destruction of the tunnels at Margival, on the Laon-Soissons line, during the Siegfried movement, and so long as Rheims was held by the enemy.

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Thanks to the model arrangement of the two armies, our preparatory work was carried out smoothly and up to time. Bad weather and poor visibility favoured concealment.

We also succeeded in making the enemy continue to think that we meant to resume our offensive at Amiens. To confirm him in that impression a large scale feint attack was arranged for May 27 to June 2 on the inner wings of the 2nd and 18th Armies. Unbroken peace was to reign on the front east of Rheims to the Swiss frontier.



SKETCH 9.—The Battle of Soissons and Rheims, May, 1918.

Altogether twenty-nine divisions were assembled for the offensive of the 7th and 1st Armies. Main Headquarters also retained at its immediate disposal a considerable number of divisions which had already arrived or were on their way. Once more the assembly in the fifty-five kilometres of front line between Vauxaillon-Brimont was carried out mainly in the night of the attack only. The enemy were quite quiet. When the 1,158 batteries, at 2 a.m. in the morning of May 27, opened an overwhelming and annihilating fire upon the enemy,

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who was utterly surprised, the 7th Army had a concentrated force in its first wave of fifteen divisions under the command of Generals von Larisch (54), Wichura (8th R.C.), von Winkler (25th R.C.), von Conta (4th R.C.), Count Schmettow (65), ready for attack, and the 1st Army three divisions under the command of General von Ilse (25th A.C.).

### THE ATTACK ON THE CHEMIN DES DAMES AT THE END OF MAY

After three and a half hours' artillery and trench mortar preparation the divisions surged forward against the Chemin des Dames between Vauxaillon and Mont d'Hiver and Mont Viller. The small enemy force holding the position, six French and three English trench divisions, were overrun and the Chemin des Dames and the Aisne-Marne Canal reached in one swoop. As early as the afternoon our leading units were over the Aisne. By the evening the centre of the 3rd Army had already reached the Vesle on both sides of Fismes. A break-through with a depth of twenty kilometres had been attained in one day. The Aisne-Marne Canal was also crossed by the left wing of the 7th Army.

Our previous objective could now be extended. New strategic possibilities opened to us. All other considerations must give way to the single idea of exploiting the extraordinary success of the first day. Main Headquarters insisted that everything depended upon occupying the hilly region west of Braisne, south of Fismes and north-west of Rheims, as soon as possible. On the right wing our line was to be rapidly advanced to the heights between the Oise-Aisne Canal and the Aisne. This last task was assigned to the right wing, the 7th A.C., under General von François. During the night and the following day the 7th Army forced the crossing of the Vesle on a broad front. Braisne and Fismes were taken and Fort Condé fell. The right wing was held up.

Behind the shattered Chemin des Dames front the enemy at first tried to organize a systematic resistance, but in vain. He threw in his reserves, but they were beaten and scattered. It was only on the two wings of the break-through that he succeeded in maintaining his defence by local reserve. Our advance here was delayed by a resistance that became more



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obstinate every hour. In the case of the 1st Army, too, the difficult wooded region hindered a rapid advance.

On the 29th the upper course of the Ourcq was crossed, Soissons was taken by General von Wedel's 5th Division, Fère en Tardenois by General von Leipzig's 36th Division, and the works on the north-western front of Rheims were stormed.

On this day I could restrain my impatience no longer; I simply had to go forward and see with my own eyes how things were shaping. I wanted to visit the Staffs, view the battlefield and greet as many as possible of my brave soldiers in person. My trip took me first to the Headquarters of the 7th Army at high and lovely Laon, where I greeted the Army Commander, General von Boehn, and thanked him for his brilliant arrangement for the operation. Once more the generalship of this resolute leader had proved its worth. From there we went by the road to Courtecon, on the Chemin des Dames. The road first ascends up to Bove Plateau, behind which lies the deep valley of the Ailette. On the far side rose the steep ridge of the Chemin des Dames like a mountain wall. What streams of blood had already flowed in fighting for this ridge! In September, 1914, the brave troops of the 7th R.C. had brought help at the last moment to the regiments of the 2nd Army in their desperate struggle, and driven the French and English again from the heights. The French offensive in April, 1917, had witnessed the most sanguinary struggle for its possession. After its failure we won back the whole Chemin des Dames in the summer by a series of brilliant isolated operations, and abandoned it voluntarily in the autumn after the collapse of the Laffaux Corner. Now we had gone more than one better, for not only was the long fought-for ridge absolutely in our hands, but our brave divisions were surging forward many kilometres beyond it on the heels of the flying enemy. All these thoughts flashed through my mind as I saw the Chemin des Dames with its scored and scarred slopes in the blazing sunlight before us.

The only road leading over the ridge looked as if a nation of ants were busy on it—transport, batteries and infantry simply poured along it. It was a wonderful picture of war! The roads between the two ridges of the Bove Plateau and the Chemin des Dames had been utterly destroyed by years of shell-fire. Here Pioneers and labour battalions were working

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feverishly to repair them. It was only with the greatest difficulty that my car could be pushed and pulled along. Everywhere I met with a warm reception. How nice it was to be once more among my brave troops, with my finger on their pulse, so to speak, instead of sitting in the office at Headquarters and waiting with almost uncontrollable impatience for every telephone or aeroplane report. The commander of modern times is denied the part assigned to a Frederick or a Napoleon on the battlefield. The enormous mass of troops and the huge areas they occupy prevent him from conducting operations on the spot. All the greater is his gratitude for those rare opportunities of appearing among his troops at historic moments and absorbing direct impressions of the fighting.

From the eminence of the Chemin des Dames there was a splendid view over the whole scene of the attack. The thunder of the guns rolled onwards ahead of us and aircraft fought in the blue summer sky. We reached the headquarters of the 25th R.C. on foot. General von Winkler and his Staff were standing on a knoll from which there was a panorama miles in circumference.

It was just as at manœuvres. The headquarters flag fluttered in the wind; runners and motor-cyclists came and went, and the telephone worked at high pressure. General von Winkler was able to tell me that his divisions—the 10th, 33rd, 197th Reserves, 1st Guard Infantry—under the command of Generals Dallmer, von Schönberg, Wilhelm and my brother Eitel Friedrich, respectively, seemed to be making good progress.

On we went down into the valley, and along the canal to a small mill where the Staff of the 1st Guard I.D. was quartered. I had a moving meeting with my brother after so long an interval and on the occasion of so mighty a victory. An airman who dropped a few bombs close by helped to raise our spirits even higher.

On the way back we took the great *chaussée* along the Vesle to Pontavert. When we got level with the Mont d'Hiver we saw a long column of motor-cars. I suspected that the Emperor was there and went to join him. Thus on the evening of this memorable day I was able to give my father a personal report of the excellent progress of the operations.

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He was highly delighted.

The Field-Marshal also was present, and he shook my hand hard and thanked us warmly. We ended the day by climbing to the top of the Mont d'Hiver, the fortress-like eminence which had been the enemy's right pivot of the whole Chemin des Dames position. Some of the Pioneers described the fierce struggle for this height, in which they themselves had participated.

On our way back we passed long columns of English prisoners. I spoke to some of the officers. They seemed very downhearted. They were already absolutely worn out when they came from the Somme sector to what they thought would be a quiet sector. The fate of war had swiftly and suddenly overtaken them there. I asked one of the prisoners how it came about that they had heard nothing of our preparations for the attack, as some of our artillery had had to be brought up quite close behind the front line. He replied that the thousands of frogs in the Ailette valley had made such a din in the night that nothing could be heard above it. The converse of the famous case of the geese in the Capitol!

When, in the evening, I shook my Chief of Staff's hand with a grateful heart, he was able to read in my eyes all the great and rousing impressions the day had made upon me. The reports which came in had practically nothing but good news for us.

### THE CONTINUATION AND CLOSE OF THE OFFENSIVE IN THE BEGINNING OF JUNE

Our original objective had been left a long way behind by the corps in the centre—8th R.C., 25th R.C., 4th R.C., under Command 25. We were only half a day's march from the Marne. As early as midday on May 29 Main Headquarters ordered that the left wing of the 18th Army and the 7th and 1st Armies should continue their attack in the direction Compiègne—Dormans—Epernay, and that the hilly district between the Vesle and the Marne south of Rheims should be occupied to secure us against attack from Châlons. An advance beyond the Marne was not intended as it would only have lengthened the flanks of the

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break-through to a dangerous degree. There was also no strategic objective south of the Marne. The still unbroken impetus of the offensive must therefore be used in some other direction. The main thrust was to be continued to the south-west across the line Soissons-Fère en Tardenois in the general direction Verberie-Crepy en Valois-Château Thierry. The left wing of the 7th Army and the right wing of the 1st had to pivot on Rheims. The Marne was to be the southern limit for both attacks and also serve as support for the outer wings. It was not to be crossed in force, but the crossings were to be secured.

On May 30 the Marne was reached by the 4th R.C. and Schmettow's Corps. On this day of triumph fell General Freiherr Prince von Buchau, the brave leader of the 28th Division, which was in front. The enemy was still offering a vigorous resistance on the front of Larisch's Corps (the 54th), north-west and west of Rheims. On its left Winkler and Wichura's Corps had already gained a front which practically faced due west. The same day the right wing of the attack crossed the Soissons-Hartennes road. The fall of Soissons also shook the front still holding behind the Oise and the Ailette sooner than we expected. On May 30 and 31 the divisions of the 38th R.C. and the 7th A.C. on almost the whole of this front were able to force the enemy south of the Ailette and the Oise back into the old French lines of the pre-Siegfried movement time. On June 1 the leading units of the army, the main body of which had wheeled west, reached the forest of Villers-Cotterets, and on the 2nd the little river Clignon. The part of Château-Thierry north of the Marne fell into the hands of the 231st I.D. after severe house-to-house fighting. The 1st Army took over the front of attack against Rheims, after the left wing of the 7th Army (Command 65) had been put under its orders. After May 31 the idea of decisive progress in this quarter was abandoned. Heavy artillery turned its attention to Villers-Cotterets and Epernay. For a time Main Headquarters played with the idea of letting the left wing of the 7th Army cross the Marne and advance on Epernay with a view to setting the 1st Army's attack against the Rheims hill region in motion again. In view of the failing strength of the troops and the ever-increasing enemy resistance Schulenburg and I opposed this idea, which was then soon dropped. After a



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quiet interval the 1st Army was assigned the task of carrying out raids and capturing Rheims.

The enemy High Command had been completely surprised by our attack, and appeared not to have realized at once the full extent of our thrust across the Chemin des Dames. But at length it once more succeeded, thanks to its superior means of transport, in throwing strong reserves, particularly American divisions, on the whole front of the break-through, before there was a catastrophe, and gradually restoring a continuous line of defence. In this way they were helped by their great railheads in the direction of Paris and Montmorail-Epernay-Châlons. From June 2 onwards the resistance stiffened in both directions of our attack, after our outer wings had already had to be content with a step by step advance. Moreover, both the extensive forest of Villers-Cotterets and the wooded heights on the west and south-west front of Rheims were favourable for defence, and the difficulties of supply, which could only be brought up to the divisions engaged in the attack by motor and horse transport, made themselves felt to an increasing degree.

In view of this situation my Army Group Staff as early as June 3 opposed the continuation of the offensive in the form of open warfare. The attack must not be resumed except after systematic preparation and then only at a particularly favourable point, or in parts of the line where local straightening-out was necessary. The resumption of the offensive in a south-westerly direction was to await the result of the attack on the southern front of the 18th Army.

The success of the May-June offensive relatively exceeded that of the "Great Battle in France." Our booty, particularly in war material, was enormous—more than 50,000 prisoners, 600 guns and far more than 2,000 machine guns.

In comparison, our own losses may be regarded as small. The region we had conquered was one of the most fertile in France. Our break-through, 60 kilometres deep, had been obtained in barely four days. The 7th Army was but an equal distance away from the outer forts of Paris. The Rheims basin was cut off on three sides. The enemy's front had additional sensitive points which could be made the jumping-off ground for subsequent operations.

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### THE ATTACK ON THE SOUTHERN FRONT OF THE 18TH ARMY

The offensive in a south-westerly direction could be resumed in a short time if the enemy on the west front of the 7th Army could be effectively menaced in flank and rear by the attack of the 18th Army. The preparations of the 18th Army for a thrust from the Montdidier-Noyon line were therefore to be hastened on as much as possible. The process of regrouping the battle artillery of the 7th and 1st Armies had begun at the end of May.

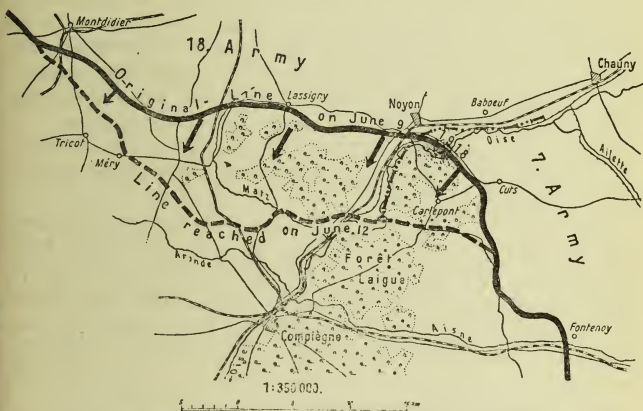
The unexpected threat to Paris had inspired the French to the concentration of all their resources for the defence of the capital. Up to June 5 we had calculated that on the front of our break-through at least 43 infantry and 3 cavalry divisions had come into action, while we, though the attacker, had employed only 39. The Forest of Villers-Cotterets favoured the secret concentration and movement of the enemy's reserves. After June 3rd strong counter-attacks, supported by tank squadrons, began along the whole western front of the 7th army.

On the front of the 18th Army, also west of Noyon, artillery and air activity suddenly became more intense from June 7 onwards. The enemy seemed to be anticipating an extension of our offensive at this point. There was some doubt as to whether surprise was possible, but it was none the less decided to carry out the attack. We could hope that the great mass of artillery of the 18th Army would none the less open the way for the infantry into the enemy's lines.

In spite of the enemy's counter-measures, which became increasingly vigorous, we succeeded in completing our preparations in accordance with plan. On June 9 on the 30 kilometres of front between Montdidier the 13 assault divisions of the first wave, under the command of Generals von Oetinger (9th A.C.), von Webern (17th A.C.), von Scholer (8th A.C.) and von Hofmann (38th A.C.), stormed forward after artillery preparation lasting three and a half hours. This time the attack was against an enemy who was ready for it and had his defences distributed in depth. He had concentrated 8 trench divisions and 4 counter-attack divisions on his front. Our difficulties were also increased by the fact that in many places he was holding an old trench system and that the area

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was particularly favourable for defence. Yet thanks to the incomparable heroism of the assaulting force we succeeded in breaking through the enemy's lines with their wide zone of wire and advancing through the difficult country in some places twelve kilometres—as far as the Matz. Compiègne was under fire from our field guns. Under this pressure in the direction of Compiègne the enemy east of Noyon was compelled to abandon the area he still held in front of the old French lines. All the same, such a break-through as would have led to open warfare was denied us. As early as the 11th General Mangin started counter-attacks, particularly against the



SKETCH 10.—The Battle of Noyon, June, 1918.

western wing of the attack, which in places forced this back somewhat. A vigorous thrust south of the Aisne by the 7th Army—with a view to making progress easier in the direction of Compiègne—gained but little ground. It had no effect on the attack of the 18th Army.

The 18th Army had not succeeded by its thrust in setting the offensive of the 7th Army in motion again. The operation on the whole front from Montdidier to Rheims had therefore to be regarded as at an end. Its continuation would only have used up troops urgently required for other tasks and led to a useless struggle in a battle of material. The concentra-

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tion of these forces must be begun at once. The armies had to organize for defence. The objection that the breaking-off of the attack also gave the enemy considerable relief and enabled him to economize men for use on other fronts was not a decisive factor, inasmuch as the proximity of our jumping-off ground for an attack on Paris was such a menace that it compelled him permanently to keep a large force on that front.

The enemy's losses had been heavy. The French divisions in Flanders were to a large extent gradually drawn upon and the enemy's High Command had been compelled to replace them by new American divisions. When to-day we turn to the ample evidence in the enemy's war literature and realize the more than critical situation of the Entente, its statesmen's frantic cries for help to Wilson and the exceedingly serious view taken by Foch, there cannot be the slightest doubt that in those days of June, 1918, the fate of the war hung by a hair. I will not here discuss whether it would have been possible for our High Command within the main framework of the general situation to obtain a complete victory by immediately bringing up the large reserves earmarked for the Flanders offensive and concentrated behind the front of Rupprecht's Army Group and throwing them in without a moment's hesitation at the point where we had just broken through. But I think that the critical examination of that question will become one of the most important and interesting debates in military history.

### REFLECTIONS ON THE RESUMPTION OF THE OFFENSIVE

As the operation had developed, the tactical and strategic situation of the 7th Army in its salient was very unfavourable. It was threatened on both flanks. The thickly-wooded country gave the enemy a chance of concentrating unobserved and attacking by surprise. If it were to be a permanent line, it could only be held by a force which was relatively too large. It must, therefore, be improved by an advance or withdrawn behind the front. The first alternative was chosen principally because we could retain the initiative by another vigorous blow. To the German High Command it was absolutely essential that the enemy should not be given time or the chance to give unhampered effect to his ever-increasing



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superiority in men and material at some point chosen by himself. Unfortunately Main Headquarters was once more without the necessary resources with which to deliver a fresh blow at once.

The choice of the point for the new offensive was also vitally influenced by the fact that the supply to the fronts of the 7th and 1st Armies on the Marne would remain a difficult business until railways of a good carrying capacity were constructed in their rear. We could not rely on the Laon-Soissons line for between four and six weeks. The capture of Rheims would be of far greater importance for our railway situation. The single line of railway going round by St. Erme-Chaudardes in the Aisne valley (this was in course of construction) was an utterly inadequate substitute. Thus the capture of Rheims was essential some time or other. Still more important was it to mount our offensive in such a way that the largest possible enemy force should be not merely beaten, but destroyed. Possibilities of this kind were opened to us by a double envelopment on both sides of Rheims. If we advanced rapidly, and succeeded in cutting off the Rheims salient south of the Marne, the hostile force within it would be eliminated so far as future operations were concerned.

On June 21 the Army Group issued the order for the attack. The day was left open for the time being. This offensive also was to be based on the factor of surprise. To make it possible for the 7th Army to devote itself mainly to the new task, it had to be relieved of part of its defensive front which faced south-west. For this purpose Main Headquarters put Army Detachment 9 under General von Eben into line between the 18th and 7th Armies. It took over the sector of the front from the Oise to the latitude of La Ferte Milon. The front of the 7th Army was thereupon extended eastwards to Chambrecy. It was to be the task of the 7th Army to break through the enemy's lines between Château Thierry and Chambrecy, seize the crossings at Epernay and the heights south of that town, and push on south-east on both sides of the Marne until contact was established with the advancing troops of the 1st Army. This army's task was to neglect the northern front of the Rheims salient for the moment, leave the Rheims hill region on one side, and thrust forth on both sides of the Vesle, starting from the line Brunay-Auberive. It was to

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make a line for Châlons and join up with the 7th Army. The business of the 3rd Army was to cover the left flank of the operation. Its first task was to secure the line St. Etienne-Somme Suippes-Perthes, and as the attack of the 1st Army progressed, to advance with its right wing to south of Châlons, so as to protect it as it crossed the Marne. The offensive was thus planned for a front of 120 kilometres, including that part of it which took no part in the attack.

This was to be accompanied by an attack of the 7th, 9th and 18th Armies, designed to reach the short Montdidier-Château Thierry line, and get the great forests of Compiègne and Villers-Cotterets behind our front. It was also contemplated that in certain circumstances the troops, after the completion of the offensive of the 7th, 1st and 3rd Armies, might have to be brought back to the line of the Marne between Château Thierry and Châlons. Speaking generally, therefore, this new offensive also had no great strategic purpose in view of a kind to decide the campaign. Its purpose was rather a series of separate attacks at different times and in different places, with a view to improving the line which circumstances had imposed upon us by securing a shorter front. Main Headquarters hoped that, as in the May and June offensives, the French would thereby be compelled to throw in their still available reserves, and to withdraw large forces from Flanders, thereby substantially weakening the Flanders front. If this diversion succeeded, the war was to be decided by the destruction of the English in that region somewhere about the beginning of August.

While the preparations for the attack were being pushed on with ruthless energy, the front facing Paris between Montdidier and Château Thierry was never quiet. In almost daily partial attacks, which steadily increased in violence, the French tried to press back and wear down our lines. Our divisions of this part of the front were subjected to an interminable strain, and greatly exhausted by this uninterrupted fighting in defences which had only been improvised. To relieve them by reserves from the Army Group would only have been possible by prejudicing the chances of the approaching offensive. The reserves behind the front of Rupprecht's Army Group were retained by Main Headquarters for the final blow planned in Flanders.

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The preparations of the 1st and 3rd Armies proceeded rapidly and smoothly, but in the case of the 7th Army there was delay owing to supply, which was still in an unsatisfactory state. The start of the offensive was, therefore, ultimately fixed for July 15 only.

During the four weeks of preparation the general situation had become more and more strained. The enemy hitherto had not succeeded in recovering freedom of action. It could, therefore, be assumed that in expectation of another German offensive in the near future his first concern would be to gather together new reserves and try to ascertain our intentions. At the end of June two Italian divisions were identified on the south-western front of Rheims. The number of the American divisions in line increased to eight, and ten more were known to be in reserve.

On July 10 a rumour went round the Army Group that a great French attack south of the Aisne was imminent. The Forest of Villers-Cotterets prevented us from seeing the concentration alleged to be in progress there. From now onwards we had to anticipate the possibility of a hostile attack south of the Aisne, and our front had to be strengthened. The Army Group suggested that course to Main Headquarters. Unfortunately the reinforcement was inadequate. An order was issued to the 9th Army to weaken its right, unmenaced wing for the benefit of the front south of the Aisne, to arrange for artillery flank fire, treat the enemy's assembly positions and shelters to a copious supply of gas, and to concentrate and send up their counter-attack divisions to positions in the rear. Unfortunately that was the utmost we could do.

In the last few days before the offensive the local collisions on the front between the Aisne and the Marne were increasingly frequent and sanguinary. Yet the idea of the offensive was persisted in, in the expectation that its success would relieve this front also. On the fronts of the 7th, 1st and 3rd Armies activity had increased after July 10. In view of the general strain of the situation on the Western front, this could not be regarded as a sign that the enemy had discovered our preparations for attack in that quarter, particularly as fighting activity was continuously on the increase on the fronts of the other army groups also.

If I now permit myself a few reflections on the Marne-

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Rheims offensive, I shall carefully refrain from any criticism of the decisions and measures of our High Command. In my opinion this whole complex of questions still requires the searchlight of the most fundamental expert investigation by military writers. Such publications on this subject as I have read hitherto have by no means exhausted the problem. I am fully conscious that my contribution to the subject is not a large one, and will merely describe the standpoint adopted by myself, in full agreement with Count Schulenburg, towards the prospective operation. Taking it all round, we agreed with the selection of the front for the attack principally because the conformation of my army front, with its salients, re-entrance and angles urgently required straightening out if it was to become a firm permanent line. For this reason it was quite in accordance with our ideas that the attack should not be a huge operation with the intention of deciding the campaign. Its objective could only have been Paris, but on our way there we should certainly strike such an obstinate enemy resistance (for the French had strong reserves concentrated here to cover their capital) in a region full of obstacles, and, therefore, peculiarly favourable for defence, that in all probability our initial successes would merely be followed by a prolonged and exhausting battle of material.

The intention of Main Headquarters to force the decision on land, not on the front of my Army Group, but against the English on the right wing in Flanders, seemed to us right in theory, but there was still the question whether, in view of the previous wastage, and that to be anticipated in the approaching offensive, Main Headquarters would be in a position to produce the mass of troops and material required to attain its great object and secure a real decision. On this matter we were sceptical, both on account of the state of our assault divisions and more particularly on account of our drafts. For the supply of men from home was dropping off rapidly, and such as came were, generally speaking, no longer of the best stamp. In our eyes the contemplated Marne-Rheims blow, under the compulsion of the dynamic law, was probably the last great offensive effort of which we were capable. As it was not intended to produce, and could not produce, a strategic decision, even in case of complete success, we could not resist an uncomfortable feeling that ultimately



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the whole Western front would not be spared the hard fate of the past three and a half years—I mean the resumption of those loathed and frightful defensive battles, and this time under far more difficult conditions. The utter failure of the June offensive of our Austro-Hungarian ally on the Brenta and Piave, the Turkish defeat in Asia, and the hardly-concealed war weariness of the Bulgarians, contributed to make the military situation of the Central Powers appear in anything but a promising light. I will not conceal the fact that I myself and my clever and far-seeing Chief of Staff, as well as my G.S.O.I, Major von Bock, usually an irresistible optimist, were a prey to a certain mental depression as we faced our new task.

We had tactical anxieties also. In any case, the crossing of the Marne, which Main Headquarters had ordered, and an advance in the marshy woods on the far bank was a difficult undertaking. Moreover, the closing scenes of the offensive in May and June had already given us a foretaste of the kind of job the capture of the wooded hills south of Rheims would be. On the other hand, the conditions for the attack in Champagne against the enemy's deep-trench system seemed to us more favourable. But here again, as on the whole front of attack, a decisive success could only be anticipated so long as our ally in the previous offensives—surprise—did not refuse its assistance, and the position, so to speak, fell at a blow. It all came back to that. If the factor of surprise was lacking for any reason, the whole operation would fail with the opening move, and the best course would be to break it off at once.

One more thought worried us in the last few days before the attack began: the weakness of the western front of the 7th and 9th Armies opposite the forests of Villers-Cotterets and Compiègne. If our enemy knew his business, he could wrest the initiative from us by a thrust at Soissons at the moment in which we were striking on the Marne and in Champagne. Anyhow, experience shows that tactical doubts and mental conflict precede every great military enterprise. Nothing venture, nothing win. And in the critical situation in which we found ourselves we simply had to venture and venture a good deal. Hitherto in the great hours General Ludendorff's soldier's luck—the luck of the able—had not deserted him. Why should it turn its back on him this time? As late as

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the evening of July 14 I rang up the Chiefs of Staff of the 1st and 3rd Armies, Lieutenant-Colonels Hasse and von Klewitz, to make certain whether surprise was assured. Both were confident that the enemy had so far noticed nothing. His harassing fire on our back areas was normal. So now in God's name—forwards !

### THE ATTACK ON BOTH SIDES OF RHEIMS IN THE MIDDLE OF JULY

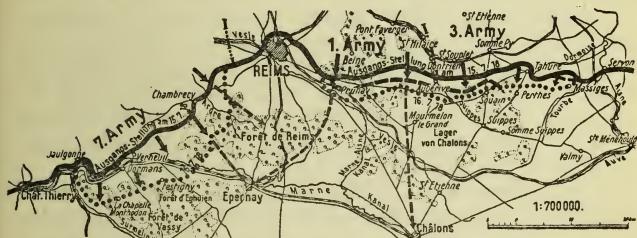
Forty-seven divisions were made available for the attack. Of these, the 7th Army had twenty-one, under the commands of Generals von Kathen (23rd R.C.), Wichura (8th R.C.), von Conta (4th R.C.), Count Schmettow (65), von dem Borne (6th R.C.) ; the 1st Army fourteen divisions, under the commands of Generals von Ilse (15th A.C.), von Lindequist (7th R.C.), von Gontard (14th A.C.), Langer (24th R.C.), and the 3rd Army twelve divisions, under the commands of Generals Krug von Nidda (12th A.C.), von Endres (1st Bavarian A.C.) and Wild von Hohenvorn (16th A.C.).

About eleven in the evening of July 14 I took my car to witness the bombardment from an observation post near the front. It was a lovely summer night, and my strong and trustworthy Protos car sped noiselessly through the quiet streets of Charleville to the road through Rethel to the Champagne front. The further we got the louder became the irregular thunder of guns along the front. After four years of trench warfare one's ear is so well trained that it perceives the strength and direction of gun fire on the front with remarkable accuracy. Thus during our journey we decided that there was moderate harassing fire, a conclusion which filled me with a certain anxiety. At last we reached our destination, an artillery observation post near Pont Faverger. I ascended the little wooden platform with my officers and received the report of the artillery commander there : " Moderate harassing fire. In general the enemy is quiet." I had to remark that I could not accept that view ; I had, on the contrary, a decided impression that the French were keeping up a very lively fire on our back areas. Many explosions were heard, and we could see several of our ammunition dumps on fire. My doubts increased.

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We spent the last few minutes before the bombardment keyed up to the highest pitch. An officer, watch in hand, counted off the last minutes—50—40—30—20—10 seconds. And then there was a thunderous roar, as if the end of the world had come. The whole front from Rheims to the Argonne vomited fire and flame. More than two thousand batteries of all calibres hurled their iron hail at the foe. It was an overwhelming scene, the pitch-black sky stabbed by quivering flashes of lightning, bursts of flame, a scene from the Inferno, an apocalyptic symphony of destruction.

In the grey light of morning I reached my Army Headquarters. No news had arrived so far. After an hour's sleep



SKETCH 11.—The Battle on the Marne and in Champagne on July 15 and 16, 1918.

### REFERENCE.

- Original line on July 15.
- ..... Line reached on July 16.
- Final line after the attack.
- > Direction of attacks.
- > Direction and objectives of the proposed movement to cut off Rheims.
- - - - - Army boundaries.

I took my car again, and first I went to Menil-Lepinois, the headquarters of General von Gontard, one of my tried and trusted leaders in the Verdun battles. But nothing definite was yet known. The assault had taken place at 4.40 a.m., and the enemy's first position had been captured at all points. Beyond that there was little news. It was not a good sign. Soon reports began to come in that apparently the enemy had evacuated his front line according to plan, and that we were not getting forward. This had a discouraging sound, and I saw my first doubts in the way of being confirmed.

Then I went to Menil post near by, where I knew my father

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had taken up his station. When I arrived, the General Staff Officer, Captain von Ilseemann, came to meet me, in the expectation of good news. He was horrified when I told him my impression that we should probably be held up after taking the first line. This disappointment affected my meeting with my father. He, too, was under the impression that all was going well, and it grieved me to have to say that I regarded the situation as unpromising. We rang up my Chief of Staff, and then learnt definitely that but slight success had been obtained, and our troops were being held up before the enemy's second line, which was intact. We gave orders that this line should be prepared for assault by a fresh bombardment, but in my heart of hearts I had to admit the bitter truth that the offensive had failed. It is a terrible moment when the commander can no longer hide from himself that an operation of such importance has not succeeded. In deep and anxious thought I returned to Charleville, via the Headquarters of the 1st Army. Here I found grave but resolute men. My Chief of Staff confirmed on the map what I already knew, that the French plan had been to evade our blow, so that our artillery preparation had destroyed a trench system which had been almost entirely evacuated.

The enemy had got wind of what was coming from prisoners ; he had been prepared for the attack for days, and the surprise had failed ! The French had made skilful use of our system of elastic defence, and found time to organize his defence accordingly on the threatened front. Our first slight gain of ground was simply the enemy's advanced zone only. Behind this his main line of resistance was so far back as to be out of effective range of our bombardment and barrage. A fresh artillery concentration and a second bombardment would have been necessary to get our attack going again.

The 7th Army performed prodigies of valour. In spite of the heavy fire in the valley of the Marne it succeeded in penetrating the enemy's lines on the southern bank to a depth of six kilometres. Although the temporary bridges across the Marne were destroyed again and again, fresh troops, heavy artillery and ammunition column followed each other over the river. Here Colonel Unverzagt, Commanding Officer of the Pioneers of the 7th Army, met a hero's death. This fearless man had worked with untiring devotion day and night and



## The German Offensive in 1918

directed the crossing of the river. For a considerable time he had been on my Staff.

It was clear by the evening that here, too, the great objective of our offensive could not be reached. On July 15 itself the 3rd Army was ordered to break off its attack, and the next day the 1st Army was forbidden to resume it after an unsuccessful attempt. Our dense front in Champagne was immediately thinned out and troops were withdrawn. On the 16th the attack of the 7th Army south of the Marne was also abandoned. Only the attack on the northern bank was to be continued. If it succeeded in reaching the eastern edge of the heights lying west of the Rheims zone the town would fall into our hands, and with it the most important railway junction.

On the 17th the precarious situation of the units of the 7th Army fighting south of the Marne and the heavy counter-attacks against them brought the Army Group to the conclusion that the southern bank should be evacuated. Main Headquarters agreed with this decision, but reserved the time for the beginning of the retreat.

In a short time the development of the situation made further unforeseen and momentous decisions necessary.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE END OF THE WAR

#### THE FRANCO-AMERICAN ATTACK AT SOISSONS AND FISMES IN THE SECOND HALF OF JULY

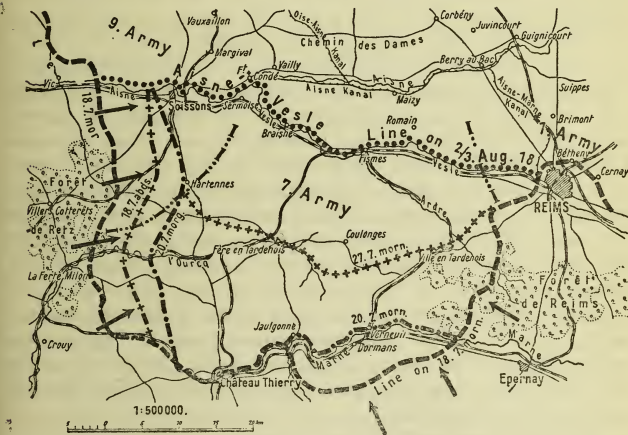
THE unfavourable position of the Army Group was rightly realized by the French High Command. A strong force had been quickly and secretly drawn from the zone north-east of Paris and concentrated in the extensive forests of Villers-Cotterets and Compiègne against the front between the Aisne and the Marne. While the majority of the assault divisions of the 1st and 3rd Army were still locked in deadly struggle with their enemy on the southern front of the Army Group, Marshal Foch struck the flank and rear of the German operation on July 18 on a front of fifty kilometres. At the same time he brought up strong reserves against the south and south-east front of the 7th Army. Quite obviously the intention of the operation was a double thrust through Soissons and Fismes with a view to cutting off and destroying the German forces south of the Aisne.

At 5.40 a.m. the enemy's infantry (including a number of American divisions) attacked the 9th and 7th Armies without any artillery preparation and simply following the barrage. They were supported by a large number of low-flying aeroplanes and tanks in masses unprecedented hitherto. Many sectors of this front were not organized in sufficient depth, and our divisions, exhausted by months of fighting, and decimated by losses and influenza, could not stand up against this surprise attack. The enemy succeeded in piercing the advance zone at many points and inflicting heavy losses in men and material in the first rush. In places, without meeting any serious resistance, he forced our lines back eight kilometres.

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On the other hand, the enemy attacks south of the Marne and on the southern front of the 7th Army failed against the pluck and resolution of the 113th Division, the 10th Reserve, the 2nd Guard and the 195th Division.

It was afterwards said that some of the divisions on this front of attack refused their duty. I utterly deny it. The front was much too weak and in particular inadequately supplied with artillery. At some points where the attacker had an easy task the thin lines of defence were overrun by an overwhelming superiority. On the other hand, there were many



SKETCH 12.—The Defensive Battle between Soissons and Rheims from July 18 to the retirement to the Aisne-Vesle line on August 2, 1918.

examples of obstinate resistance to the last. The G.O.C. 13th A.C., in accordance with his duty, had made the most urgent representations as to the danger that threatened, but Main Headquarters had thought that they ought not to supply the reinforcements requested from the reserves they had earmarked for their blow in Flanders. My Army Group had not at its disposal sufficient reserves to strengthen the menaced front.

The situation of the 7th Army and the left wing of the 9th was very critical on the evening of the 18th. In view of

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the depth of the break-through, the absence of sufficient reserves, and the impossibility of bringing them up quickly owing to our poor railway communications, we had to anticipate an extension of the enemy's success. The most dangerous possibility was his further progress in the direction of Soissons. Our line of defence in front of this town must therefore be supported with all the reserves available. The units of the 7th Army, still south of the Marne, must now be withdrawn behind the river at once. The transfer to Rupprecht's Army Group of the division drawn from the front of the 1st and 3rd Armies and placed at the disposal of Main Headquarters was stopped.

Late in the night, when I was still reflecting on the situation with my Chief of Staff, we were both a prey to a great fear that the 7th Army was heading straight for a catastrophe if the wings at Soissons and in the hill region of Rheims did not hold. It was certainly the most critical situation in which I had found myself as Commander during the whole war. Thanks to the devotion of the arriving troops, who performed miracles of heroism—I should particularly like to mention the 14th, 6th, 34th and 28th divisions and the 3rd Reserve—the worst was avoided and the 7th Army saved from a Sedan.

On the following day the enemy resumed the attack with undiminished violence. A break-through of the front could be prevented, but in the course of the fighting, which lasted the whole day, our front line was pressed back in places as much as four kilometres.

The withdrawal of the heavy artillery from the southern bank of the Marne was successfully carried out in the night of the 18th. The attacks on the 19th against the units left on the far bank were beaten off with heavy loss. In the following night these units also were withdrawn, the enemy noticing nothing. On the next day, when he attacked the evacuated lines after a heavy bombardment, he came within effective range of the fire of our new front on the northern bank of the Marne.

It was only possible to bring up the divisions released from the front of the 1st and 3rd Armies gradually and piecemeal. As the railheads lay far back, the infantry had to be brought up mainly by motor transport, and the artillery had



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to come on foot. Several rear positions extending back to the line Fère en Tardenois-Cierjes were reconnoitred and constructed in view of the crisis, which was not yet over. In these part of the newly-arriving reserve was established, and thus the danger of a break-through was gradually averted. A large and mobile artillery reserve was concentrated behind the threatened wing south of the Aisne.

The violent attacks against the 9th and 7th Armies and the right wing of the 1st Army continued on the following days also. As their extension to the part of the 9th Army north of the Aisne and the 18th Army west of the Oise was possible, the necessary defensive measures were taken in hand at once on those fronts. On July 22 the 18th Army was transferred to Rupprecht's Army Group.

In the course of these four days' fighting Foch's offensive was finally brought to a standstill.

In a few days a revolutionary change had come over the situation of the Army Group. From being the attackers we had been thrown on the defensive. If full freedom of action was to be recovered, our first requirement was the speedy production of adequate fresh reserves. This was impossible, if the exhausting battle, the end of which could not be foretold, was continued in the huge Marne salient, which was enveloped by the enemy on three sides. Our situation as regards drafts compelled us in increasing measure to economize in men. For an offensive operation the Marne salient was out of the question for a long time to come. Our supply difficulties had been intensified by the enemy's approach to Soissons. The Army Group, therefore, contemplated the evacuation of the Marne salient at an early date. The decision was reported to Main Headquarters, and the preparations for the evacuation were taken in hand without a moment's delay. As regards the time and rate of the retirement the vital thing was to avoid costly fighting as much as possible, and to secure the withdrawal of the mass of valuable material assembled for our offensive and the evacuation of all the wounded and sick.

Further attacks were from now onward systematically avoided so far as possible without endangering our retreat. In the night of July 23 there was an extensive retiring movement on the front facing Château Thierry, and in the night of the

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26th this was accompanied by the withdrawal of the southern front behind the Ourcq.

On July 27 an order was issued to the Armies to retire behind the Aisne and Vesle in two stages. The nights in which the movements were to be carried out were not yet decided upon. Special commands and units had already been told off to make preparations for the occupation and construction of the new front. On the 30th the preparations had proceeded so far that the order could be issued for the withdrawal in the nights of August 1 to August 3. In the first night the 9th Army, temporarily holding Soissons, fell back behind the Aisne, and the 7th Army and the right wing of the first to a bridge-head position about six kilometres in advance of the Vesle. In the following night both Armies occupied the new lines behind the Vesle and blew up the Vesle bridges. On the 3rd the weak force holding Soissons was withdrawn to the northern bank of the Aisne.

We had broken away from the enemy without any difficulty, and he followed us, but cautiously. Behind the Aisne and the Vesle the Army Group was in a new and naturally strong position. It was easy to hold with a comparatively small force. Fighting died down somewhat, and some of the divisions which had been exhausted in the long battles could be rested and given a chance to recuperate for further tasks.

The retirement of the 7th Army from the Marne salient to the Aisne-Vesle line was a model of strategy and tactics. That it succeeded was primarily due to the resolution and perfect devotion of the troops as well as the well-considered and skilful measures of the Higher Commanders—Count Schulenburg and the Chief of Staff of the 7th Army divide the credit. An army which could show itself equal to such a difficult and almost desperate task was still sound at heart.

### THE CHANGE IN THE GENERAL SITUATION

The enemy's blow was at first parried by the withdrawal behind the Aisne and the Vesle. In judging it, it is of no matter whether the counter-offensive was a skilful and rapid exploitation of a favourable situation with reserves originally concentrated for defence, or—as we must assume in view of recent French publications—had been longer prepared in the know-

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ledge of our plan of attack ; even though its patent objective, the cutting-off of the Marne salient, had not been attained. But still Foch's victory had been more than a tactical success as he had succeeded in recovering the initiative, which had been lost since November, 1917. The future must show whether we were still in a position to fight him for it. The failure of the July offensive, the enemy's success on the 18th and 19th, and the evacuation of the Marne salient it involved did not *per se* preclude the possibility of our resuming the offensive. These alone are not an adequate explanation of the momentous change which came over the campaign in those July days. It was the long-foreseen and inevitable change in the relative strength of the two sides which made the situation so different from that in the spring. The great losses incurred in the uninterrupted fighting since March could not be made good even approximately. It is true that the situation of the French and English as regards drafts was also difficult, but their losses, which exceeded ours, were more than counter-balanced by the American reinforcements, which were arriving faster and faster. On July 20th the number of American divisions of which we knew had already reached 27. Even though the majority of these had not been tested in war, they were quite good enough to release French and English divisions for the active front.

At the end of July I addressed to His Majesty a "general appreciation of the situation," published elsewhere, in which I examined all these circumstances and their prospective influence on the development of events. I will give here that part of my memoir relating to these matters with a view to making known my opinion of events immediately after the turning-point in the world war :

We must ask ourselves this question : What is to happen if our enemies do not show themselves ready for peace, notwithstanding a conciliatory attitude on our side ?

We—I mean Germany—can still continue the war for a considerable time. Questions of raw material, food and output will certainly become more difficult as time goes on. Even if our war material industries supply what is necessary for the continuation of the war, there can be no doubt that within a measurable time our reserve for the army will be exhausted. The attempt to make the still existing reserve of man-power

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at home available by an extended Military and Auxiliary Service law has unfortunately been dropped for reasons of internal politics. Whether the alternative course adopted will have any and what success remains to be seen. But it is certain that the strength of our army will gradually decline.

Moreover, the growing lack of officers is making itself severely felt, and this cannot be made good, even if the situation as regards drafts becomes more favourable.

Thus our enemies on the Western Front, continuously fed by American reinforcements, will gradually have an ever-growing numerical superiority. We need not overrate the Americans, but neither must we underrate them, and certainly not the amazing performances of their armament industries. The longer the war lasts, the greater will be the influence of these factors, and the enemy's western front will, therefore, become stronger in a military sense.

It is possible that we may be forced back entirely on the defensive again. No doubt, in view of our experiences, we shall even then be in a position to continue the war for a very long time (though certainly gradually losing ground), and to inflict great damage on our enemies, who will have no easy task even in the year 1919. But it must not be forgotten that a defensive thus forced upon us would be accompanied by a lowering of the morale of the army, which would be conveyed to the Homeland and create a critical situation there. The lack of unity and real resolution we are even now feeling may promote a pessimism which may give the radical-democratic movement enormous impetus, even in the country districts, and start a cry for "peace at any price." Yet that is exactly what would make a cheap peace impossible. If we had to accept a bad peace under the pressure of events internal difficulties would thereby be in no way removed; on the contrary, it would be the beginning of them. For even if conditions might be less terrible than in Russia, we should certainly have to expect an onslaught on the dynasty and the triumph of democratic-communist ideas. This may seem a gloomy picture, but it is scarcely exaggerated, so long as events at home are allowed to take their course and no one takes prompt and ruthless action. There is no way of evading this struggle. At the moment our task is still a relatively easy one. But if we give way again, the issue of the war



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becomes doubtful, and with it the welfare and prosperity of the German Fatherland. In a beaten Germany we should see the same conditions at home as now prevail in Russia. We must act. There cannot be not much doubt how.

As a matter of fact, we never resumed the offensive. On August 8th Marshal Foch began his second great surprise offensive against the 2nd Army astride the Amiens-St. Quentin road, and on the 10th against the 18th Army between Montdidier and the Oise. The German western front was finally thrown on to the defensive.

The attacks against the 2nd and 18th Armies ushered in the last mighty battles of the campaign, which continued uninterruptedly up to the Armistice.

The August offensive, a double envelopment, was at first directed against the wedge-like salient projecting towards Amiens, which had existed since the battle of March. The later attacks were mounted in both directions ever further from the starting-point of the August offensive. Ultimately they extended the zone of the enemy's offensive to the whole length of the line from the coast to the Moselle.

The strategic object of the enemy's High Command seems to have been to give the German Army in the West no rest, so that it would be gradually exhausted. This is the explanation for the attacks, with short pauses, which followed one another continuously on new sectors of the front. Right up to the Armistice a rapid decision by the concentration of all their strength at one or more points was never attempted by our enemies. There can be no doubt that by avoiding such a decision, the enemy's High Command could make full use of the weapon in which they were superior to us—numbers and the existence of fresh reserves always ready for action. On the other hand, the system they adopted did not obtain decisive strategic results, so that with all my admiration of the energy and ruthless determination of Marshal Foch, I cannot regard the handling of the enemy's offensive from July to November, 1918, as a strategy superior to ours. We succumbed to numbers, mass and material, and not to the genius of the French General.

The August battles were fought outside the zone of my Army Group, but by drawing on our reserves in increasing measure

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they affected the fronts not directly concerned. Most of the reserves we had created by the retreat behind the Vesle had hastily to be sent to our neighbours who were being attacked. We could no longer give rest or time for training to divisions released from the front. The commander's heart bled, but the hard reality of our life-and-death struggle left no choice.

### THE BONDS OF DISCIPLINE BEGIN TO LOOSEN

We did not conceal from ourselves the great danger to the internal cohesion of the army involved in the excessive strain to which the troops were subjected. We tried to avert them as much as possible by influencing the subordinate officers. In an Order of August 4th I said :

“The heavy fighting of the last two months, the great and continuous strain of officers and men, and to a certain extent the arrival of inadequately trained drafts, have led at times to a slackening of discipline which is betrayed in the bearing of the troops. I attach all the greater importance to the maintenance of iron discipline, because the long duration of the war, with all its accompanying phenomena at and behind the front, are unquestionably exercising disintegrating influences in this sphere, too.

“Our young company officers, who have not had the strict military training of peace time, will not be able, however willing, to keep the training and discipline of the troops at the necessary level without constant direction and supervision. The primary responsibility is with the Regimental Commander. A commander who never tires in his concern for his men, shares dangers and privations with them, and trains his officers along those lines, will find ready obedience and trust. Respect and honour, but also the severe penalties of our penal code, are the weapons with which he must keep his regiment firmly under control. Leniency is out of place in cases of offence against discipline.”

In another Order of August 28th I pointed to the dangers of unscrupulous enemy propaganda and revolutionary agitation :

“Enemies within and without are striving in an increasing degree to depress the morale of the nation and the army. As is well known, open revolution is preached in pamphlets galore.

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It is certain that a large proportion of the pamphlets in circulation are not given up, partly out of slackness, but partly also because some like reading them. The regimental and independent commanders are primarily responsible for the spirit of the troops. In their officers, and also in the mass of the well-disposed N.C.O.'s and men, they have the means of influencing weak and vacillating characters, and particularly the young draft from home. Openly bad elements must be treated with the utmost severity. With iron discipline and continuous concern for the welfare of the men depression and insubordination cannot exist. We must once again reach the stage even in war in which every officer knows his men and their home circumstances, enters into their troubles and does what he can to relieve them.

"The great questions of the present moment offer our officers the opportunity of frank discussion with men who will be grateful for it. It is the task of the commander to make sure that by carefully selecting his lecturers and the matter of the lectures patriotic instruction shall not be along party lines, and thus have a result exactly the opposite of what we desire. The men must be referred to the history of Prussia and Germany to show that our nation has found the road to greatness only in hard fighting and through grave crises. There is no reason for depression. Even twenty-four enemy states will not overcome the German nation, so long as it does not lose its faith in itself. I want to draw the attention of the Army and Corps Commanders particularly to the L. of C. formations, the Landsturm, convalescent depots and hospitals. Experience proves that depression and agitation show their heads in those quarters first."

I was fully aware that the orders and warnings issued by the Army Group were in no way adequate at that stage of the process of disintegration which was going on in the army to destroy the evil at its source, and that what was required was a radical solution in the shape of wholesale measures on a broad uniform plan by the central authorities in the Empire. I must refer on this subject to what I say in my "Memories."

On August 12 the newly-formed Boehn Army Group took over the command of the 2nd, 18th and 9th Armies. The latter, therefore, left my Army Group. In General von Boehn's place General von Aberhardt was appointed Commander of

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the 7th Army. Since the beginning of August there had been uninterrupted minor actions on the Vesle front, but they had no influence on the position of the 7th and 1st Armies. The increase in the enemy's artillery facing the right half of the 7th Army was patently connected with the obvious preparations for an attack upon the 9th Army.

On the 20th the expected French attack on the 9th Army began, and on the 21st and 28th the English opened an offensive against the 17th Army between Arras and Albert.

### THE MILITARY SITUATION ON THE WESTERN FRONT FROM THE END OF AUGUST TO THE MIDDLE OF SEPTEMBER

At the end of August there was no longer any doubt that we were finally on the defensive, and in view of the increasing disproportion of numbers had no prospect of recovering the initiative as a whole. One question imperiously demanded an answer: How could we hold out against the enemy long enough to succeed in securing an acceptable peace?

Our ideas on this subject were crystallized in a short memoir I addressed to General Ludendorff on August 26th. I said:

"The Franco-Anglo-American offensive, conducted as a single operation since July 18th, and the rapid success of the enemy attacks point to the conclusion that the enemy is seeking the decision of the war. By a strikingly economic use of his men and the unsparing employment of second-rate and exhausted trench divisions, Marshal Foch has hitherto succeeded in maintaining a strong reserve of good divisions, thus making it possible to continue his plan of campaign, which is conceived on broad lines and has far-reaching objectives. The conduct of the operations hitherto points to the fact that the purpose of these divisions is not so much the immediate exploitation of a success as to deliver some new great surprise blow. In any case, we must anticipate the continuation of the offensive for a long time, and expect further violent attacks against sectors of strategic or political importance. We must meet the enemy's grandiose plan of campaign by looking ahead and preparing our defence. Just as the enemy did, we must devote ourselves to having an effective reserve in hand when the enemy's offensive comes to an end. If we do so, the Entente's onslaught upon us will



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fail, and thereby a basis for negotiations will be created. The enemy is out to destroy our reserves. We can only prevent his doing so by adopting the principle that battle is not to be accepted except where the conditions for the defence are favourable. Where these conditions do not exist, we must withdraw by sectors according to plan, until an opportunity for a counter-attack or a favourable defence, *e.g.*, on some strong line, presents itself. The enemy's initiative makes this course inevitable. Its disadvantages are not to be ignored. Retreat is bound to have an influence on the morale and powers of resistance of the men, so that wherever possible every opportunity must be taken of dealing a shrewd blow at an enemy following incautiously. That will make the troops realize that the operation is intended, give them confidence and a sense of superiority, and convey that feeling to the Homeland also. Our losses will be less than in a rigid defence. The method I am proposing makes heavy call particularly on the officers, but I am convinced that the task will be carried out if the nature of mobile defence is thoroughly understood, and we once more learn how to seek out, find, and speedily make the most of the enemy's weaknesses.

"Systematic withdrawal remains but a temporary expedient. It must end in the occupation of a strong permanent line favourable for defence over a long period, and giving us a chance of creating a large reserve by a substantial shortening of our front. This permanent line must be so far from the present battlefields that even if the fluctuating actions now in progress continue for weeks, we shall have ample room for a systematic retirement."

At this time I thought that, so far as the Crown Prince Rupprecht's and Boehn's Army Groups were concerned, the appropriate permanent line would be the old line from which we had started our spring offensive, while, in the case of my own Army Group, the best chance of a wholesale retirement appeared to be offered by a systematic fortification of the battle zone back to the so-called Hunding-Brunhild-Argonne line, *i.e.*, more or less behind the Serre-Souche and Upper Aisne sectors. The period of relative quiescence on my Army Group front in August had already been used to carry out the scheme I have mentioned by employing all our available force in the construction of defensive trench systems, particularly the

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strategic trench systems in rear. The preparations in the previous year for the occupation of the Hunding-Brunhild-Argonne line were resumed as the Gudrun Movement proceeded. To keep the army mobile for the withdrawal we had ordered the evacuation behind that line of everything which was not absolutely indispensable to it. But it is certain that we did not go far enough in putting these measures into execution.

In his answer, General Ludendorff approved my appreciation of the situation in general, but regarded the withdrawal to the jumping-off line of March, *i.e.*, the Siegfried Line, as the limit to which we could go in view of our unfavourable position as regards drafts. The objection to every retirement which enabled us to economize men was that it enabled the enemy to economize at least to the same extent, and that, with his numerical superiority, he could always renew his attack at some other point. It was further to be remembered that our available labour force was inadequate to prepare even our old lines and that the troops would have a lot of work before them there.

The result was that Main Headquarters soon found itself compelled, in consequence of the continued attacks upon Rupprecht's and Boehn's Army Groups, to consider the idea of constructing or reconstructing a line further in rear even in the zone of my Army Group. At the beginning of September it approved our proposal of resuming fortification work on the Hunding-Brunhild-Argonne line. Unfortunately, it was not in a position to give us labour units adequate for the speedy preparation of a deep, defensive zone.

Meanwhile, the progress of the enemy's attacks against our neighbour, the 9th Army, had gradually threatened the Vesle line of my 7th Army in flank and rear. In the night of the 3rd September the right wing of the 7th Army was, therefore, withdrawn behind the Aisne at Maizy. The line of juncture with the eastern sector of the Vesle front was formed by the Romain switch, which had been constructed earlier on. The attacks against the 9th Army gradually extended to the Aisne front of the 7th Army. We succeeded in beating off these attacks as well as those against the Romain switch.

As the 7th Army was being involved more and more in the fighting of the 9th Army, the latter returned to my sphere of

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command on September 9th. Boehn's Army Group was dissolved.

On that day the 9th Army was engaged in heavy fighting between the Ailette and the Aisne, more or less in the line we had held before the Laffaux Battle in 1917. In touch with it, Rupprecht's Army Group had been brought back more or less into the Siegfried Line as early as the 2nd on instructions from Main Headquarters.



SKETCH 13.—The German withdrawal from August, 1918, onwards.

### REFERENCE.

- Line at the beginning of August, 1918.
- - - - - The Siegfried Line.
- ..... Line at the end of October, 1918.
- . - . - The Antwerp-Meuse line.

The next day brought further fighting for the 9th Army. The wastage was high. The other fronts of the Army Group were heavily drawn upon to supply reserves to support the 9th Army. In addition, we had to surrender fresh troops to Rupprecht's Group.

With a view to creating effective divisions, we had to go further along the path of breaking up divisions. In August we had begun to reduce battalions from four companies to

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three, simultaneously increasing the number of machine-guns, and we now extended this practice to all divisions. Thanks to ruthless raids on the strengths of the 7th, 1st and 3rd Armies, the Army Group succeeded in more or less holding the line taken over by the 9th Army. Meanwhile, we had identified increased enemy artillery against the Romain switch. On the 14th followed the first attack, which was beaten off with heavy loss.

The effect of the fighting on the neighbouring armies' fronts and the difficulties of supply to the 9th Army, which was greatly hampered by the movement of material to the rear in its L. of C. zone, led us, on the 18th, to give this sector to the 7th Army. The 9th Army Command was dissolved.

Since the middle of September great enemy activity had been observed in the fronts of the 1st and 3rd Armies, which had hitherto been quiescent. But at first there were no palpable signs of an attack on a large scale.

To Lieutenant-Colonel von Klewitz, the splendid Chief of Staff of the 3rd Army, we mainly owe the fact that the enemy's preparations for his attack were discovered in time, so that a reinforcement of the threatened front was possible.

### THE GREAT ENEMY OFFENSIVE IN CHAMPAGNE AND THE ARGONNE AT THE END OF SEPTEMBER AND THE BEGINNING OF OCTOBER

On September 26th the enemy took the offensive on both sides of the Argonne from east of Rheims to the Meuse. An eleven hours' bombardment preceded the infantry attack, which began about 10 a.m. In Champagne the attack of the French 4th Army, under Gouraud, was mounted on a front of 40 kilometres, with the main pressure between Suippes and Massiges, against the left wing of the 1st Army and the front of the 3rd Army. Once more the assault divisions, which greatly outnumbered the forces of the defence, were accompanied by great masses of tanks and aircraft. East of the Argonne, the American attack, delivered in dense masses, struck the left wing of my 3rd Army and the 5th Army of Gallwitz's Army Group.

The main resistance along the whole front of attack was promptly withdrawn behind the advance zone, which was two



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to three kilometres deep. The 1st Army succeeded in holding its advance zone. On the front of the 3rd Army the main line of resistance was held on both wings of the attack, and it was only in the region of Tahure that the defender was forced behind that line. The enemy was aiming at a substantial break-through east of the Argonne, particularly on the front of our left neighbour, the 5th Army.

Even though we had succeeded in strengthening the points attacked, more particularly at the expense of the 7th Army, the fact remained that the numbers required for a proper defence had not been reached, even approximately. All the more splendid was the feat of the 3rd Army—upon whose shoulders the main burden of the Champagne attack fell—in the fortnight during which the battle raged without a pause.

It seems that the enemy had expected a speedy break-through in the direction Betheniville–St. Etienne. This was to bring about the fall of the Moronvillers Hills from the rear. The attempt failed as early as the first day. Its non-success compelled the French High Command to throw into action some of the reserves it had brought up from the Lorraine front. Up to October 5th, we identified thirty-seven divisions in the battle. They were assisted by inexhaustible quantities of artillery, tanks and aircraft. Thanks to its iron resolution, the 3rd Army succeeded in holding its own. The determined generalship of General von Einem (who once again proved his brilliant qualities) and his Chief of Staff and the firmness of the defence were not shaken even by many local reverses. The troops performed incomparable feats. I cannot mention individually, for they all covered themselves with undying glory.

In view of our great inferiority in numbers, we could not carry our defence to the point of holding a definite zone at all costs. We had not the men for counter-attacks. By systematically evading the enemy's blows, we, therefore, time and time again, re-established a single, continuous front on the sectors pressed back. The progress of the American attack east of the Argonne had a substantial influence upon the withdrawal. On October 5th the left wing Corps of the 3rd Army, which was fighting there, was attached to the 5th Army, and thus left my Army Group. My message of farewell to the Argonne fighters, with whom I had been so closely associated

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since the first year of the war, closed with the words which the heroic defender of Vauquois, Lieutenant von Herwarth of the 2nd Guard Regiment, used in his last report: "The enemy is closing in on us in masses from all sides. We shall fight desperately to the last man. Long live the King!"

Our slow retirement in Champagne had been facilitated by three well-constructed rear zones of defence lying one behind the other. The preparations for the Gudrun Movement also now proved useful. On October 9th a stage-by-stage withdrawal brought the 3rd Army to the third line of defence level with the Aire. With a view to shortening its front, the 1st Army, in the night of October 4th, had evacuated the Moronvillers Heights, and retired behind the Suippes in two stages. This movement had not been noticed by the enemy, and it was not dictated by any action on his part.

Meanwhile, the heavy fighting on the new right wing of the 7th Army had died down after September 22nd. As it was mainly the 7th Army which had been largely drawn upon for reinforcements for the Champagne front, it had not been possible to keep its numbers at a level adequate for a proper defence. In the nights of September 26th and 27th the south-west corner—which was most seriously threatened—was brought back to the Oise-Aisne Canal with a view to evading fresh heavy blows. In the night of October 1st followed the abandonment of the Romain switch line and a retirement along the whole front behind the Aisne.

After the left wing of the 1st Army had withdrawn behind the Suippes in the night of the 4th, the retirement of the 7th Army behind the Aisne made it impossible to hold on any longer to the Rheims salient with the Berru and Brimont Heights, especially as the defence of that sector swallowed up a large force. The 1st Army, therefore, now brought its right wing back behind the Suippes to the strong position we had constructed there. Our point of juncture with the 7th Army was established at the confluence of the Suippes with the Aisne at Conde. All these movements were effected without a hitch and practically without any interference by the enemy.

On October 8th the 18th Army was again attached to my Army Group. It was engaged in heavy fighting, its right wing bent back to join up with the 2nd Army about 10 kilometres east of the Siegfried Line. The left wing was still

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in the Siegfried Line. The English attack against the 2nd Army and the right wing corps of the 18th Army made it necessary in the following night to withdraw the right half of the 18th Army to the line Bohain-Ribemont. For the 10th, a retirement was ordered to the so-called Hermann Line, a line east of Bohain-Aisonville-west of Macquigny-east bank of the Oise, the latter the point of juncture with the Siegfried front. In many places the Hermann Line had only been marked out, and was still in the first stages of construction.

With the accession of the 18th Army, a new and heavy burden was laid upon the all but exhausted reserves of the Army Group.

### THE GUDRUN MOVEMENT OF THE 7TH, 1ST AND 3RD ARMIES. BATTLES ON THE WHOLE ARMY FRONT UP TO THE MIDDLE OF OCTOBER

With a view to creating the necessary reinforcements for the 18th Army, the successful resistance of which was vital to the strategic southern front behind the Serre and the Aisne, the Army Group received the consent of Main Headquarters to start the Gudrun Movement. It brought the 7th, 1st and 3rd Armies into a well-fortified and naturally strong line which could be held with fewer divisions than had been required for the previous front in the Hunding-Brunhild Line.

During the various retirements since the beginning of the Champagne Battle the 1st and 3rd Armies had already completed the first stage of the Gudrun Movement. Beginning on the night of the 10th, the 1st and 3rd Armies retired in two stages, and the 7th Army in three. Thanks to our preparations, which had been in progress for more than a year, the retirement was carried out according to plan and without at first being observed by the enemy. On the 12th the 1st and 3rd Armies were behind the upper Aisne, and on the 13th the 7th Army was safely in the new front behind the Serre and the Souche. It was unfortunate that, owing to the unusually dry weather, our preparations for flooding this region made their effect felt but slowly in spite of the fact that the sluices were opened promptly.

On October 12 began the diplomatic negotiations for an

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armistice. The greatly strained situation which was thereby created was duly recognized by me in a most serious warning to my armies: "Recent political and military events are extremely likely to have a disintegrating effect upon the Army in the field. In these vital weeks I must ask that the very sharpest measures be taken against any loosening of discipline at the Front and more particularly on the Lines of Communication. At this of all moments, concern for the welfare of our hard-fighting troops must not cease, but a firm hand is more necessary to-day than ever before. We must keep the fighting power of our Army at the highest level. We shall succeed in doing so if every officer and man fully realizes the seriousness and dangers of the present situation."

On and after the 11th the battle on the front of the 2nd Army and the right wing of the 18th Army flamed up again in daily mass attacks. Resisting obstinately, the right wing of the 18th Army, keeping touch with the 2nd Army, was gradually forced back by the 18th October as far as east of Wassigny. The pressure against the southern half of the 18th Army also increased, and accordingly the salient on the southwest front between the Oise and the Serre was brought back in the night of the 17th to the line Origny-Mesbrecourt. The western switch of the Serre front had therefore to be abandoned. On the 19th, to conform with the movement of the 7th Army, the left wing of the 18th Army was brought back behind the Oise-Sambre Canal.

The French armies soon thrust forward against the new southern front of the Army Group, between the Oise and the Argonne. Relying on their numerical superiority, they attacked at once. Their main effort was made against a large bridge-head which the 7th Army held across the Serre on both sides of the Laon-Marle road as well as the sector between the Sissonne and Germainmont connecting the Souche and Aisne fronts, and the projecting angle on the eastern front of the 3rd Army between the Aisne and the Aire on the western edge of the Argonne. At first the enemy attacks obtained no more than small local successes, and it was only at and south of Vouziers that they succeeded in gradually setting foot on the east bank of the Aisne.

In view of the moral effect which a further retreat must have on the diplomatic negotiations in progress at this very



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moment, Main Headquarters had ordered that the Hermann and Gudrun lines were to be held. A strategic retreat was only permissible if there was increased danger of a catastrophe as a result of continuing our resistance in our present lines, which were very long. Our business was therefore to hold on. But the strong natural defences of the new Gudrun front could not compensate permanently for our growing weakness as regards numbers, which was becoming ever more critical. The fighting strength of the divisions were in some cases less than a thousand rifles. For weeks it had been impossible to relieve divisions in line. The reserves of the Army Group were used up, and yet the demands on the 18th Army and the two Army Groups on its right and left were increasing all the time. The divisions which became available after the Gudrun Movement were immediately sent to them. But in consequence of overstrain, the fighting power and resolution of individual units were on the down grade.

My Chief of Staff and I took the view that without regard to the course of diplomatic negotiations our first and vital task was to shorten our front so as thereby to secure the reserves we had lacked. Only then did it seem to us there could be any prospect of maintaining a successful resistance until the peace negotiations began. We therefore considered that a retirement to the Antwerp-Meuse line was called for at once, and also contemplated a further large-scale withdrawal to the line Maastricht-Luxemburg-Metz-Strasbourg-Upper Rhine. Of course we did not conceal from ourselves the serious disadvantage which the loss of a large quantity of war material (difficult to replace) and the over-burdening and blocking of the railways involved. But, in our view, these risks must be faced in preference to that of a catastrophe to the Army. Being bound by the orders of Main Headquarters, the Army Group imposed this new and heavy task on its worn-out armies, trusting to the efficiency and devotion they had displayed for more than four years. The fact that we succeeded in holding out against the mass attacks of the enemy for weeks without reserves, and with battle strength hitherto considered to be impossible, and the further fact that all our armies had found the energy to deliver short but successful counter-attacks are the best proof of the fighting capacity and inward resolution of the German Army. It was, and remained, unconquered to the last.

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I gave expression to these feelings in an Army Order issued to the 1st and 3rd Armies on October 13 :

“The hard defensive battle in Champagne has been fought. By using enormous masses of men and material the enemy intended to overrun the thin German line. His assault collapsed with the heaviest losses against the heroic resistance of the brave 1st and 3rd Armies. The general situation made it necessary to bring our Army back to shorter fronts in the rear. Your victory is not affected by that. You have done your duty now as always. You have seen that superior numbers cannot get the better of you. If the enemy ventures to attack us again we are prepared to protect our hearths and homes to the last man. That is what I expect and shall continue to expect of the invincible 1st and 3rd Armies.”

A little unimportant episode which occurred at this time still sticks in my memory. It reveals the unbroken spirit of the front line troops at this period. It was on October 14. With my personal aide-de-camp, Major von Muldner, I was on the height north of Rethel, which for years had been the headquarters of the 1st Army Staff, and now lay in our front line. The whole district, which had been in the L. of C. zone but a short time before, lay in deathly silence, broken occasionally by a shell from French long-range guns. In the distance we could see the dust raised by enemy columns on the march. An observation officer near by brought me to the Headquarters of the 466th Infantry Regiment, which was close behind us in a dug-out in the back line. Its Commander, Colonel Burchardi, a fine old warrior, was highly pleased with this surprise visit and astonished me with his soldierly vigour. In plain and moving words he described the situation, and emphasized the fact that, notwithstanding all that had happened, the troops still retained the feeling of superiority over the enemy's infantry. The only bad feature was the terrible reduction in battalion strength, which made it impossible to hold extended sectors with the necessary depth.

The news of my arrival had spread rapidly among the reserve units scattered about the neighbourhood in small groups. From all sides little companies hurried up to me, cheering loudly, or gave me a friendly greeting from afar. In spite of their deplorable clothing and worn features, there was no trace of depression or indifference in their bearing and their words.

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Nothing but determination and self-confidence. And yet in the almost longing looks they cast at me, I read the silent question: "How long will it last?"

Deeply moved by this incident, I said to my companion as we left the battlefield: "We might be at the beginning instead of the grim end of this war."

A memorial drawn up by the Headquarters Staff on October 17 described the general situation: "If the diplomatic negotiations now in progress have no result, there remains nothing for our Army and Country but a life-and-death struggle. I entirely realize the full meaning of this step. But it must be taken. Reluctance to let things reach the stage of a life-and-death struggle with the German nation may make the Entente more conciliatory. But if the struggle begins it will gain time for us, and with time the possibility of political and military changes. If these hopes fail us we can still fight for our honour. We owe this to ourselves, our past and our future. Our decision to act must be taken at once even if the result of the diplomatic negotiations is not yet known. Wholesale measures are necessary, measures unprecedented hitherto. All our resources must be concentrated in the service of national defence. All other considerations are secondary."

On the very day on which we were committing these views to paper, General Ludendorff was fighting his hard battle for their realization in the War Cabinet in Berlin. The next few days showed that the Government could not brace itself up to translate these ideas into fact. Ludendorff fell, and, with his fall, the Homeland abandoned the struggle.

### BATTLES ON THE FRONT OF THE ARMY GROUP IN THE SECOND HALF OF OCTOBER

The Army stood alone. My firm confidence in its heroism was not disappointed. Since October 19 the enemy had started systematic attacks in the region of Vouziers, and since the 25th, against the inner wing of the 7th and 1st Armies. On the 25th the attack we had been expecting since the 16th began against the Hermann line of the 18th Army. It was beaten off, but, owing to lack of reserves, the Army Group decided to break away according to plan from the enemy once more. In the night of the 26th the left wing of the 18th Army and the right

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wing of the 7th were brought back to the second Hermann line, Guise-Dercy, which had been merely reconnoitred. The bridge-head across the Serre had already been evacuated by the 7th Army in the night of the 21st.

The offensive against the inner wings of the 7th and 1st Armies, which had begun on the 25th, was followed by fresh attacks every day. The position of the new strategical southern front was critical, especially as east of the Argonne the 5th Army had had to abandon more ground under the pressure of superior American forces. The necessity of creating reserves by securing a short front became more and more imperious. On October 27 my Army Staff sent the following report to Main Headquarters:

"It must be admitted that the bulk of the French Army is on the front of my Army Group. It is faced by German lines which are extremely exhausted, and whose reserves, judging by former standards, are not fit for the field. The low strengths of the divisions are well known. The men are doing their duty with the utmost devotion. The officers right up to those of the highest rank are simply admirable in the way they rally wavering units. It goes without saying that the Army Group is ready to hold out to the last, but it is my duty to report that if these violent attacks continue, I think, as a result of my own observation and the reports of my Armies, that the possibility of a break-through must be reckoned with. There is a danger that as a result of serious defeats, Germany may lose her power to defend herself altogether, and be forced into unconditional surrender. I am, therefore, of opinion that the lesser evil is a shortening of the front. The loss of much valuable material, the defective state of the Antwerp-Meuse line and the difficulties of remedying it seem to me, so far as can be judged from this distance, obstacles easier to surmount than decisive defeats on the front.

"By withdrawing we shall gain time, and the destruction of railways, bridges and roads will delay the enemy's concentration for fresh attack. Moreover, a re-grouping on a large scale, for an attack against Alsace-Lorraine, for example, takes time. If we succeed in giving the troops a little rest and reinforcing them with drafts, we may hope that the Antwerp-Meuse line can be held."

Main Headquarters replied:

"If the Army succeeds in beating off the enemy's attack



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for a little time longer, and does not lose much ground, the conditions imposed on us by the Entente will be less onerous than if our whole front between the sea and Verdun were withdrawn. The effect both at home and abroad just now would have the most momentous consequences."

So there was nothing for it but to hold on in our dangerous position. On October 28th I called on my troops :

"The enemy thinks we are shaken. He is leaving no stone unturned to break our fronts. At this moment everything depends upon proving our strength and defending every inch of ground sword in hand."

### THE RETREAT TO THE ANTWERP-MEUSE LINE

While the army faced its hard and self-denying task and kept a continuous front in spite of local reverses, something happened which made the situation extremely critical. In the Homeland there were ominous signs of internal disorder, the prelude to approaching revolution. Main Headquarters was compelled to send back the last of the reserves it had had such difficulty in securing for the purpose of repressing it. Thus they took no part in the last great battle. Resistance in our present far-flung front had become simply a matter of days. In these circumstances the only course available—shortening our front by a strategic retreat—had to be adopted, even though the diplomatic negotiations had not yet come to an end. As early as August, when the situation began to become strained, it had been necessary to consider the possibilities of straightening our front strategically. If we were to create strong reserves the only possible course was a withdrawal behind some naturally strong front, for it was to be assumed that we should have neither time nor men for constructing a strategic position as we had done in 1917. In the zone of my Army Group a withdrawal behind the Meuse could alone be considered. The river was a great obstacle, and the line Namur-Carrignan was only half the length of our August front. The right wing of the Army Group, which was still furthest west, was then about 180 kilometres from the Meuse.

On October 1 Main Headquarters had ordered the reconnaissance and establishment of a strategic position in the line Antwerp-Charleville-Stenay. In accordance with these

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instructions, to preserve contact with Rupprecht's Army Group, we could only use the Meuse up to Givet, *i.e.*, on about two-thirds of my Army Group front. From there the line had to stretch north-north-west to Charleroi.

A corps command was at once detached from the front, and to it was committed the task of reconnoitring the new line and working out the tactical preparations for the occupation, defence, supply and construction of the trench system. If this shortened line were occupied it was intended to form three army sectors and dissolve one army headquarters. For this purpose the corps command was given three divisional staffs for construction work. Each had to work on one army sector. As the most important item, work was immediately begun on the construction of the rear railway system and the field railway net. Material for trench fortification was assembled in the sectors and brought up for the construction of hutments, shelters and supply depots. We had previously made a start with the evacuation from this area of everything which was not indispensable for the battles to come. Labour battalions and men for reconnoitring and supervision purposes were not at first available in sufficient numbers owing to the requirements of the fighting front.

The tactical preparations for the retreat, march sectors, roads, daily stages and questions of defensive positions, liaison, supply and evacuation were worked out by Group Headquarters and the various Army Staffs. The movements had to synchronize with those of our neighbouring Army Groups. We had to keep our eyes on the general situation, which was changing every moment as the result of the fighting at the front.

In the course of October the labour force available on and beyond the Meuse was very substantially increased. The armies received orders to send their mechanical traction artillery back from the front to the Antwerp-Meuse position, and to establish depots of all kinds along the lines of retreat. Preparations were made to destroy roads, railways, bridges and so forth at the most important points.

It was the critical position of the 5th Army on both sides of the Meuse which was the main motive for beginning our retreat to the Antwerp-Meuse line. If the enemy made further progress in the battles east of the Argonne there was a danger that it would become impossible to hold that line.

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In the night of November 1 the 3rd Army was compelled to bring its Argonne wing further back, in order not to lose touch with the 5th Army, which was being forced further and further north. In the following night and for the same reason there was a further withdrawal of the Argonne wing to the line Semuy-Le Chesne-Oches. On the 3rd the influence of the battle east of the Argonne on the left wing of the Army Group led to the two corps fighting west of the Meuse being temporarily attached to the 5th Army. If the portion fighting between the Argonne and the Meuse were pressed back even further, the retreat of the 18th, 7th and 1st Armies to the line Landrecies-Hirson-Mézières was to be carried out in the night of the 3rd. The enemy, however, followed but slowly in the footsteps of the double withdrawal of the front.

It was, therefore, only on November 4 that the order for the beginning of the retreat was issued. On that day a violent enemy attack against the right wing of the 18th Army had forced the crossing of the Oise-Sambre Canal at various points. The left wing corps of the 3rd Army, which were fighting with their flank on the western bank of the Meuse, crossed over to the opposite bank on this day. There they once more came under the orders of the 5th Army.

According to the distance from the Meuse a period of eight days, including intervals between marches, was allotted to the retreat. The daily lines of defence were carefully selected and held according to the configuration of the ground. Many temporary bridges were thrown over the Meuse, and preparations were made to make it overflow its banks above Charleville.

In spite of the reduced marching capacity of our troops as a result of the many months' fighting, and giving up units for the assault divisions, our well-prepared retirement was carried out in good order. A rather more vigorous pursuit of the 18th Army resulted in intermittent fighting on the front of that army alone. On the other fronts the enemy followed up but hesitatingly owing, as we now know, to his serious supply difficulties. In places our distance from him was more than a day's march.

On November 7 I described the situation at the moment in an Army Order issued to all divisions and L. of C. Inspectors:

"The armies of my Army Group have done their duty

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nobly. Against an overwhelming superiority they have all held their own with honour. We have never feared the enemy, and we need not fear him now. The greatest danger lies in the loosening of the bonds of discipline and the disintegrating effect of influences from outside. Whatever may happen, our task is to remain the Fatherland's best shield and buckler, its loyal, united army."

On November 5 the Group Staff transferred its headquarters to Waulsort, north of Dinant, and on the 9th to Vielsalm.

On the 6th, during the retreat, the German negotiators crossed the enemy's line on the La Chapelle-Guise road in the zone of the 18th Army. When hostilities ceased at 11.55 a.m. on the 11th the Army Group had completed its retirement to the Antwerp-Meuse line, with the exception of the 18th Army and part of the 7th Army, which were still a half day's march from that position. The 7th, 1st and 3rd Armies had succeeded in removing most, and the 18th Army part, of the large quantity of war material.

Since the 5th the disorder at home had been increasing. In the L. of C. zone also there had been a dangerous weakening of discipline among many of the drafts coming out from the interior.

On November 8 the revolution broke out in Germany. On the 9th the Emperor resigned his post as Commander-in-Chief. I desired to place my services at the disposal of the new Government for the period of the retreat. My offer was declined, and I had, therefore, to transfer the command of the Army Group to the senior Army Commander, General von Einem, when the armistice began.

Words cannot do justice to the achievements of the leaders and men of my Army Group. Their deeds are their best witness. Victorious in battles and actions innumerable, unbeaten if covered with wounds and scars, my armies reached the Meuse. The enemy, too, had suffered severely; the signs multiplied from day to day. If the army which was once the proudest the world has ever seen was not summoned to the last desperate resistance it was through no action on the part of the enemy.

It was the hardest day of my life when I had to say farewell to these my officers and men—among whom I had countless friends—in such circumstances after four years of world-historical experiences together. The last message I could address



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to my heroic armies as their Commander was issued from my headquarters at Vielsalm on November 11 :

“ TO MY ARMIES !

“ Now that His Majesty the Emperor has resigned the supreme command I also am compelled by circumstances to give up the command of my Army Group, as hostilities have ceased. As in times past, so now, I can only from the bottom of my heart thank my brave armies, and every man among them, for the heroism, self-sacrifice and devotion with which they have faced all dangers and borne all privations for the Fatherland in good times and bad.

“ The Army Group has never been conquered by arms ! With a feeling of pride and head uplifted my Army Group can leave the soil of France which they have won with the best blood of Germany. Their shield is untarnished, their soldier's honour unsullied. Everyone must see that they remain so, both here and later on in the Homeland.

“ Four long, hard years have I been with my armies in victory and crisis, four long years have my whole heart and soul been with my faithful troops. With deep emotion I take my farewell of them to-day, and bow in reverence before their mighty deeds, of which History will tell generations to come in letters of flame.

“ Remain true to your leaders as you have been true to me until their orders release you for wife and child, hearth and home. God be with you and with our German Fatherland !

“ WILHELM,

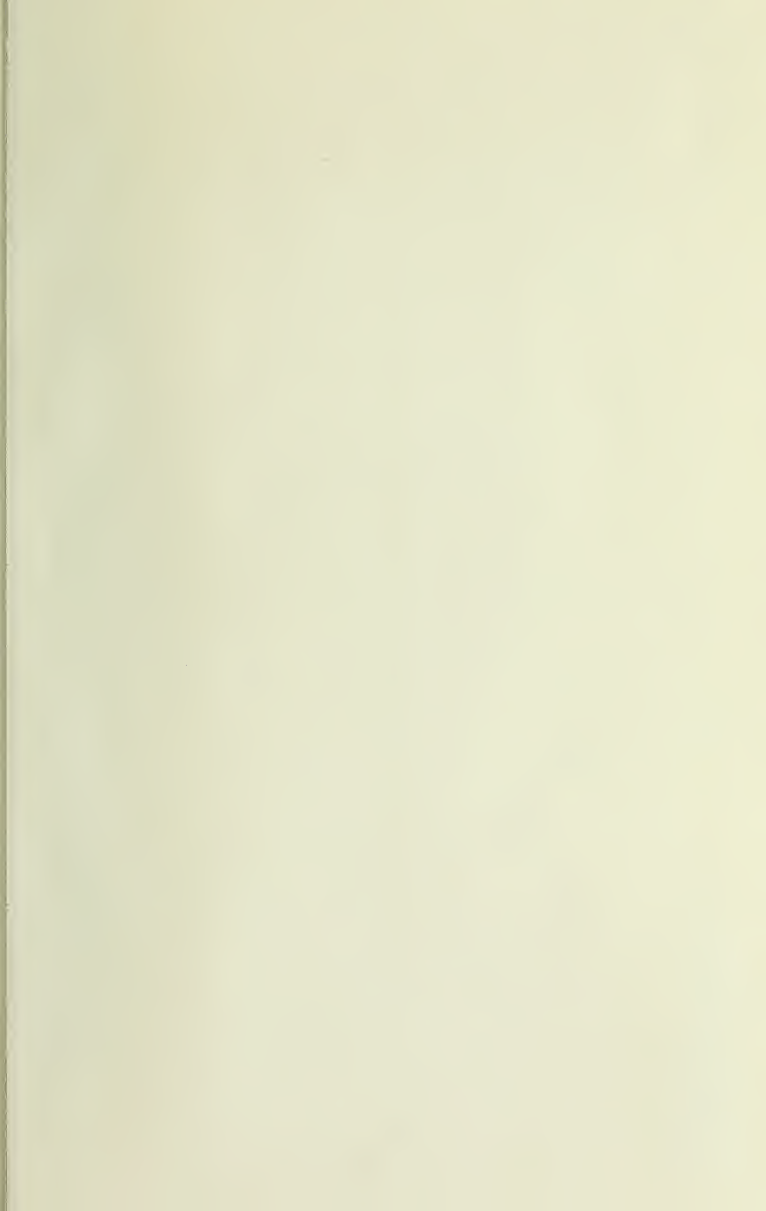
“ Crown Prince of the German Empire and Prussia,  
“ Group Commander.”

I have come to the end of what I wished and had to say about my military experiences in the four long and hard years of the world war, which now seems so far away. It was not my intention to make these my memories of Germany's heroic struggle into a book, the contents of which will pass the test of the unbiased judgment of subsequent historical inquiry. For that I have had neither the training nor the material, and I stand too near to the great events, the real truth of which will not be revealed for years. All I desired was to strengthen

## My War Experiences

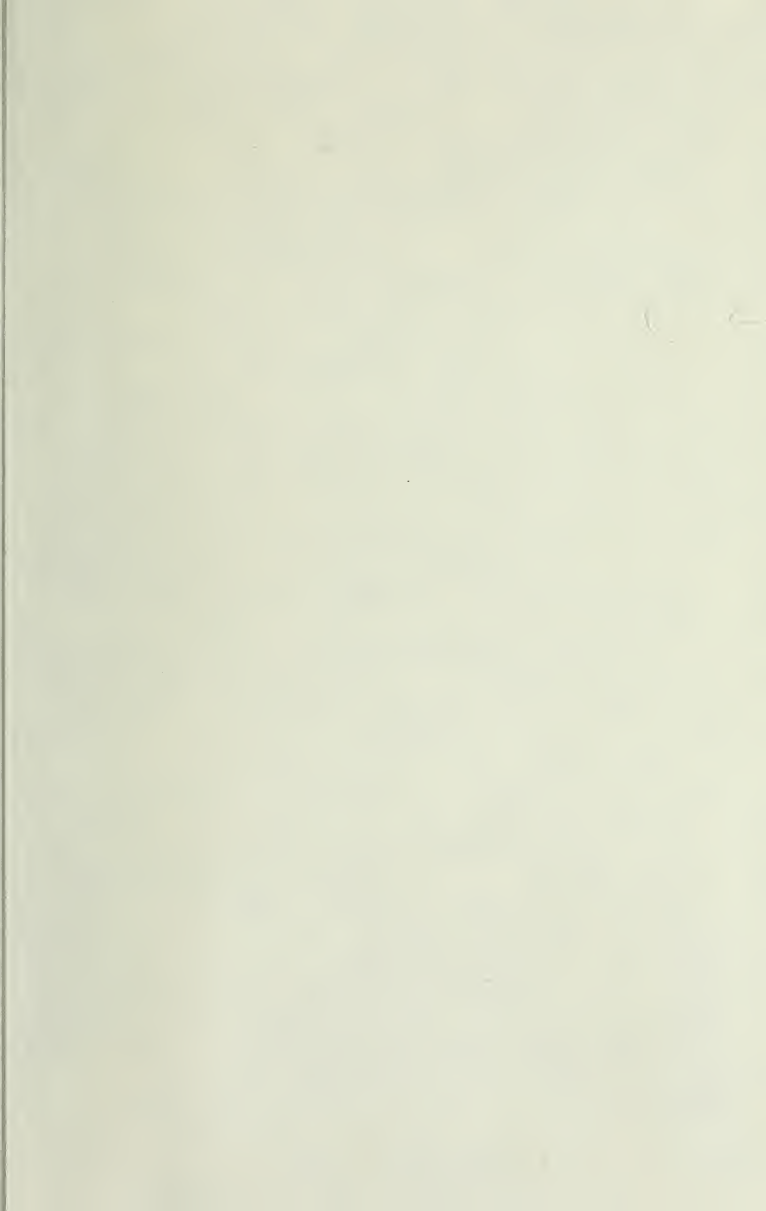
by a straightforward and truthful description of our life together in the four years of the war the bond of loyal comradeship which holds me to my incomparable troops for life. I want coming generations to know that my bitter fate and the years of exile have not been able to take away anything of my profound gratitude for the heroism and selfless devotion of my dear brothers.

My last heart-beat belongs to those who laid down their lives for the honour of Germany, and the living I greet in the sure and certain hope that they will respect and understand me as much in this book as in those days when they faced me with flashing eyes on the soil of France.











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